

# The Travails of Using an Anti-Racism and Feminism Approach

by Goli M. Rezai Rashti

*L'auteure parle de son expérience d'enseignement anti-raciste et féministe en dehors du programme d'Études de la femme. Elle soutient que la communauté*

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*universitaire devrait s'engager dans le développement et l'échange des stratégies pédagogiques plus efficaces, tout en reconnaissant les difficultés d'enseigner de tels cours en dehors de ceux qui sont offerts par les programmes d'Études de la femme.*

When I was invited to teach a course on "Women in Muslim Societies" I was very enthusiastic. As a teacher with an extensive theoretical background and experience on issues of racism and sexism, I felt I could make an important contribution to the development of the students' analytical skills. I was surprised to discover, however, that the course met with significant resistance from various students who had great difficulty connecting Islam, racism, and feminism. I eventually understood that introducing a feminist and anti-racist perspective in courses outside a women's studies program was not easy. This article is based on my experiences teaching this course for some five years. I hope this article will be the beginning of a process aimed at engaging our universities in developing and sharing effective pedagogical strategies that will make the incorporation of anti-racist and feminist perspectives an inherent part of any course offered at the university level.

## Introduction

The discussion on women and Islam has usually followed a rather narrow anti-racism perspective. Gender issues, on the other hand, are almost totally absent in the debate. In the debate regarding the opening of single-sex schools by Muslim parents in England, for example, (see Troyna and Carington), gender issues were reduced to

issues of culture, racism, and feminism while a culturally sensitive feminist approach to women's issues in Muslim communities was generally ignored. Of course, there are obvious reasons behind this lack of analysis. These discussions are generally taking place within an environment where Muslims have faced a long history of colonization and racism. Anything said runs the risk of being taken out of context and perceived as further perpetuating western stereotypical images of women in Muslim countries. There is, in a sense, a lingering apprehension about opening up any sort of discussion on the oppressive treatment of gender issues in Islam as a religion. Under such circumstances, it is immensely difficult to be critical of Islam's treatment of women from both an anti-racism and feminist perspective. Politically, it is like walking on egg shells.

In view of this, I organized my course on "Women in Muslim Societies" very carefully with specific objectives in mind. Briefly, I wanted the students to become aware of some of the following issues:

- Islam is not a monolithic religion. By studying the situation of women in several different Muslim societies, students could see how interpretations of Islam vary from Muslim coun-

try to Muslim country.

- There is a long history of western stereotypes of Muslim in general and of Muslim women in particular. It is important for students to understand the impact European colonization has had on the creation and perpetuation of Muslim stereotypes.

- Women are oppressed in Muslim countries not because of Islam as a religion but because of the way that Islam is interpreted by those in positions of power.

- There are different translations of the Islamic Holy Book, the *Quran*, in the English language and these translations give rise to different interpretations of issues concerning women in Islamic societies.

- The situation of women in Muslim countries depends on their social class as well as urban-rural differences.

- The rise of religious fundamentalism, not only in Islam but also in other religions, needs to be examined for the larger implications on the lives of women to become fully apparent.

- The feminist interpretation of Islam and women in Islamic countries.

About 90 per cent of the students were female. The majority were of Muslim background from countries such as Egypt, Pakistan, Jordan, and Iran. Ten per cent of the students were male, also of Muslim background. Almost none of the students had actually lived in a Islamic country for any extended period of time. Their knowledge of Islam was mainly drawn from their parents, the Muslim community, and their experiences in Canadian schools. Furthermore, every year the class had about 25 per cent of students who were of a white, European background. Most were enrolled in their first or second year of university. Enrollment could not exceed 20 students as the course was designed to develop critical thinking skills. This course was offered

# When Teaching a Course on Women and Islam

independently and was not part of the women's studies program.

## **How to go about teaching women in Islamic societies?**

Given the diversity of students enrolled in the course, I needed to carefully organize the structure and presentation of the course materials in order to encourage participation and open discussion. Although I was concerned about how to encourage the ability of the students from Muslim backgrounds to critically analyze issues concerning the status of women in Muslim societies, I was particularly cautious about ensuring that the non-Muslim students would not feel hesitant to ask questions or to express their ideas.

In my first year, I made the standard introductory remarks, explained what was expected from students in terms of assignments, and openly discussed with them teaching strategies. From the beginning, I made it clear that I intended to use an anti-racism as well as a feminist perspective in the course.

I started class discussions with a feminist interpretation of Islam by introducing a book written by a Muslim author, Fatima Mernissi, entitled *The Veil and the Male Elite*. During the first term, I also included several different interpretations and English translations of the *Quran* concerning women's issues. Students were expected to read and discuss the various meanings and treatments of issues pertaining to women present in these readings. Half-way through the first term, I brought a Muslim religious leader to the class (something I continued to do in subsequent years). I wanted to give the students an opportunity to learn from the official, Islamic, religious interpretations of the *Quran* regarding the role and status of women in Is-

lamic societies. I hoped that as the Islamic clergyman went on making unabashedly anti-feminist remarks, the students, as a result of their prior readings and class discussions, would develop a critical understanding of, and be ready to challenge commonplace assumptions of women in Islamic countries.

During the second half of the academic year, the course moved to the study of the situation of women in various Muslim countries. Here, the discussion centred around connections between issues of race, class, gender, and Islam. The course ended with an in-depth look at the situation of Muslim women in North America and an extensive discussion of western stereotypes about Muslim women.

As the course unfolded, however, I was surprised to sense resistance from some of the students. Several seemed quite uncomfortable with the course content. Even though I thought I had fostered a relaxed and open environment that encouraged students to approach me and talk freely about what was being discussed in class, none of the students came forward to voice any of their concerns.

I was conducting my classes in a seminar format when my job was basically to be a lecturer; and (c) that my course assignments, which consisted of two written examinations, one research paper, one class presentation, and a mark for class participation, were not enough.

The college's academic advisor seemed supportive of the way in which I was conducting this course, yet the college chose to approach the situation in a typically bureaucratic fashion. I was asked to justify why I taught my course from a feminist perspective, something which I believed should not have been at issue. Where else can ideas be discussed freely if not at a university?

In my response to the Dean, I explained why I used a feminist, anti-racist approach in the course and made it clear that, as a feminist, I did not see anything wrong with my teaching methodology. The latter was certainly in line with the college's mandate that I should develop the students' critical thinking skills. Although the college's academic advisor seemed satisfied with the explanation, I never received any support

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Towards the end of the academic year, however, I received a letter from the college's academic advisor stating that one of the student's enrolled in my class had made a formal complaint about the course to the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science. The complaint focused on three issues: (a) that the course had a feminist focus and that was not to her liking; (b) that

from any of the university's administrators indicating that what I was doing was not academically incorrect, nor was the student ever told that my approach in this course was valid and justifiable.

It was only at this point in my professional career that I fully realized the political significance of having a well-established women's stud-

ies Program at the university. Its very existence is a source of empowerment for both female academics and students as it compels academic authorities and the administrative staff to look at accusations and innuendoes against instructors for adopting a feminist approach more carefully. Certainly, it forces university administrators to respond to such accusations in a much more calculated way. Unfortunately, this incident also

There were, after all, only 20 students in the class and I had come to know all of them quite well. At any rate, I was obliged to pretend that I did not know anything about the complaint.

At the course neared its end, I marked this particular student's last two assignments which she petitioned be reviewed. Her research paper and exam were thus passed to another professor for a second opinion who indicated that I had been too generous with the marks and that they could be lowered. Nevertheless, the students' evaluations of the course and of me as the instructor were overall extremely positive. In the end, I believe the evaluations helped convince the university administrators that the course was indeed a learning experience for the majority of the students.

This experience was for me truly overwhelming. I had anticipated some problems but never that a student would actually complain about the feminist approach taken in the course. Ironically, even though the course was about women, some of the students felt that it should not have been taught from a feminist

perspective because the course was not part of the women's studies Program. This experience helped me understand some of the difficulties of teaching a course in which religious interpretations criss-cross with issues concerning women. This was especially problematic as I was dealing with undergraduate students who lacked an *a priori* education on anti-racism and feminism. I had the opposite experience when I taught a similar course to an undergraduate class in the women's studies program at the University of Toronto. In this case, the majority of the students had

a prior background in feminist studies. Their understanding of feminism and anti-racism made for an empowering experience for the students as well as myself.

In the following years, I significantly re-organized the course. Some of the more familiar concepts on anti-racism, such as Edward Said's "Covering Islam," were introduced early in the course, and it was only towards the mid-point of the academic year that other concepts, including feminist interpretations of Islam and the situation of women in Muslim countries, were introduced and discussed. My strategy was to deal with single issues first and then move gradually towards the more complex interaction between racism, class, and feminism.

I also strove to make my feminist and anti-racist approach absolutely clear to the students on the first day of class all the while stressing the point that the course's objective was not one of indoctrination but of making them critical of the subject matter at hand. I urged students to carefully review the course outline in order to ensure they were aware that this particular course was not one on Islam and religion. Last, but not the least, I refused to accept non-registered students to audit the course. I did this to eliminate the possibility of some extremely anti-feminist Muslim students from disturbing class discussions and from creating an environment of fear for those who wanted to learn and find out more about women and Islam. The course itself had a full enrollment during the five years that it was offered, with a number of students always on the waiting list to get into the course. Although there is always some resistance when teaching any course that incorporates an anti-racist and feminist perspective, my re-organization of this particular course helped to significantly reduce the tension inherent to open discussions about the interaction of race, class, and gender issues.

It has been personally gratifying to me that some of the students who took this course still keep in touch with me. They have told me how this



Kass Elan Morgain, "The Shadows That Define Us," collage, 15" x 13", 1991. Photo: Robert Hawkins

made me aware that the feminist approach is not yet validated by some faculty members and university administrators. In a sense, the debate surrounding the integration of women's perspective into mainstream university programs and courses seems utopian at this point.

The student who had complained continued to attend classes regularly without approaching me directly to discuss her grievances. This, I learned later, was because she had been promised that her name would not be released to me. It was not difficult, however, to figure out who she was.

course gave them a new perspective with which they can now challenge stereotypical views of women and Islam presented in other courses as well as in their own communities.

All in all, the experience of teaching this course over the past five years has been a learning one. It has allowed me to appreciate the importance of having a women's studies department or program at any university that claims to be an institution concerned with the promotion of equity and social justice. It is also crucial for students to understand that the university encourages the teaching of women's issues from women's standpoint by institutionally supporting a women's studies program. With regard to faculty, it is vital for any instructor to feel that they have an ally in the university and that there is nothing wrong in engaging students in issues of elementary social justice.

### **The need for integration of anti-racism and feminism: critical pedagogy in action**

More university courses must be offered that integrate issues of race, gender, social class, and sexuality into the overall curriculum, without those courses necessarily being a part of a women's studies program. One important difficulty, however, is that as instructors we have few concrete examples of how to go about teaching these courses in a manner that critically engages students and their experiences as primary sources of classroom discussions.

The two decades of work on critical pedagogy introduced by, among others, Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren have given us some directions in terms of moving away from structural determinism and bringing hope that education can create real possibilities for social change and social justice. This optimism aside, we are still lacking good examples of how these critical theories can work in practice as well as what their implications for our work can be. How do we deal with all

these issues in such a way that a meaningful voice is given to all students during class discussions? (see, for example, Ellsworth). What about if the instructor is a minority, in most cases non-tenured, woman? (see Ng).

Although we have made some progress we are faced with a constant struggle when teaching courses that question and interrogate the various expressions of inequities as in the particular course that I taught. I could have used a narrower anti-racist approach and faced very little resistance (I am aware that this is not true in other courses and situations), because most students, especially those from Muslim backgrounds, already had some information about the racist treatment of Muslims in western culture and societies. I felt, however, to deal with the issue of race isolated from women's issues would not expose the students to the complete picture. Those of us who are working from anti-racist and feminist perspectives feel strongly that these issues are connected and that although there is significant pressure in not expressing women's issues in other cultures in the context of a racist society, it, nevertheless, has to be presented carefully and analyzed within an anti-racism and anti-sexism framework. As Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis have stated:

We have some sympathy with the argument that struggles against culturally specific forms of sexism need to be undertaken in the full context of a racist society. Nonetheless we do not believe that dominant cultural forms that subordinate women, from whichever context, should be immune from critique. (102–103)

In sum, the challenge is to introduce anti-racism and anti-sexism in such a way that specific cultural and religious issues can be critiqued and discussed while at the same time being cautious and acknowledging that these critiques are taking place within a racist context. Still, these discus-

sions will be more productive if they take place in an institutionally supportive and nurturing environment, both for us as educators, especially minority women, and for our students.

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