

# **POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISM: TEACHING HOW TO AVOID PREJUDICES ABOUT MUSLIM WOMEN IN AN *ESL* CLASSROOM**

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## **RESUMEN**

La finalidad de este trabajo es proponer una serie de actividades encaminadas a que el alumnado de segundo curso de Bachillerato, mientras se realiza el proceso enseñanza-aprendizaje en lengua inglesa, sea capaz de identificar y dismantelar estereotipos sobre las mujeres musulmanas. Este trabajo está encabezado por una breve historia de la tercera ola del feminismo, el denominado feminismo poscolonial, para terminar mencionando las múltiples respuestas que ofrece el feminismo musulmán.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** feminismo poscolonial, comunicación intercultural, mujer, Islam, educación en valores.

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this piece is to propose English activities addressed to students in second year of Bachillerato with the objective of learning how to identify and dismantle stereotypes about Muslim women. The paper is introduced by a brief history of the third wave of feminism, that is, postcolonial feminism, including the multiple responses of Muslim feminism.

**KEYWORDS:** postcolonial feminism, cross-cultural communication, women in Islam, teaching of values.

## 1. INTRODUCTION TO POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST THEORY<sup>160</sup>

Postcolonial feminist criticism examines how women are represented in colonial and postcolonial literature, and challenges assumptions which are made about women in both literature and society. Colonialism and patriarchy have been closely entwined historically, but an end to formal empire has not meant an end to the oppression of women in the former colonies. Postcolonial feminists point out the ways in which women continue to be stereotyped and marginalised, ironically sometimes by postcolonial authors who might claim to be challenging a culture of oppression.

Prior to the 1990s, much Black, Hispanic and Asian theory, criticism and creative writing were overlooked by academia in the West. More recently, developments have taken place in feminist literary criticism, some of the best-known authors being Gloria Anzaldúa, Chandra Mohanty, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Gayatri Spivak, Rey Chow, Rosario Castellanos, and Cheryl Johnson-Odim. These critics reject earlier feminist approaches which assumed that women shared a common identity based on a shared experience of oppression. They reject the assumption that white middle-class women should be considered the norm, arguing that the concerns of such women are not necessarily those of all women, and that differences in the social positions of women produce very different problems and responses, even in relation to the same broad issues.

The groundwork for this new feminist criticism developed over several years through a number of anthologies of the work of ethnic women authors. Carole Boyce Davies and Anne Adams Graves edited *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature* in 1986, in which they created an African feminist criticism. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa edited *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* in 1981, in which they claimed, in the second edition, that they had bridged the gap between American women of color and Third World women. In India, the first collection of critical essays on women poets was *Studies in Contemporary Indo-English Verse* (1984) edited by A. N. Dwivedi.

Postcolonial feminist criticism makes a radical contribution to literary studies by drawing together many disciplines, challenging western ethnocentricity, and restoring plural subjectivities to literary history. The idea of a global 'sisterhood' took root in academia in the 1990s, embracing the articulation of many voices to create an inclusive feminism.

The aim was to make the writings of postcolonial women visible and intelligible to the West. However, the term 'postcolonial women' has turned out to be as problematic as other phrases related to colonialism. For some theorists the term has led to over-simplification and unthinking assertions of oppression, an approach which is an impediment to a reading beyond obvious questions of 'good' and 'bad'. Other theorists seem to claim that the terms 'racist' and 'sexist' are more or less interchangeable, resulting a confusion between the image of postcolonial women in the context of feminism, and that of the native in the context of colonialism.

Modern postcolonial feminist criticism does not simply highlight the works of women from the developing world, but allows for multiple approaches drawn from many disciplines. It challenges Western academia by showing that it has tended to treat Third World women as 'other', denying their subjectivity and imagination. It takes into account changes in the modern world by questioning assumptions about what is 'core' (the norm) and what lies at the periphery (designated as 'other') in a postcolonial world characterized by migration. Postcolonial feminist criticism is necessarily eclectic

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<sup>160</sup> Some excerpts previously published in Antonia Navarro's "Postcolonial Feminist Theory: An Overview" (2005).

because Third World writing so often responds to different social, regional, and national groups whose aesthetic values are very diverse.

Postcolonial feminism challenges traditional white western feminism for the latter's association with political liberation movements. Women around the world have very different histories with respect to their postcolonial inheritance, involving such experiences as imperial conquest, slavery, enforced migration, and even genocide. Thus, postcolonial feminists have argued for the rewriting of history based on the specific experiences of formerly colonized people, and their various strategies for survival.

As a conclusion, feminist analysis in the 1990s evolved in response to the challenges posed by ethnic and postcolonial studies to white western feminism. One of the most important points it makes is that 'women' does not comprise a coherent group solely on the basis of gender. The status and roles of women vary according to complex interactions between factors such as ethnicity, class, culture, and religion.

Although it is difficult to generalize about postcolonial feminism, we can foreground Third World women as a broad category, within which we can explore the histories and struggles of postcolonial women against colonialism, racism, sexism, and economic forces. Chandra T. Mohanty (1991) suggests the concept of an 'imagined community' of postcolonial oppositional struggles. She emphasizes the abstract meaning of this concept, which suggests potential alliances and collaborations across divisive boundaries, and the opportunity for a deep commitment to 'sisterhood'. The idea of an imagined community leads us away from traditional notions of postcolonial feminist struggles, suggesting a political rather than biological or cultural base for alliance.

Not only are postcolonial feminist women challenging ideologies which have belittled the status of women, but they are also challenging the prevailing assumption that the white western middle-class woman is the norm. At the same time, they are struggling to eradicate stereotypes which define them as subordinate, and pointing out that in spite of the decline of imperialism they are still subject, in many ways, to the pressures of neo-colonialism.

Considering the history of the feminist movement, first-wave feminism covers the suffragists' generation and groups in favour of women's rights, from 1880 to the beginnings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when most women in industrialised countries gained the right to vote. Second-wave aspired to women's participation in sexual equality and abortion. Third-wave feminism is the new generation intending to achieve a larger vision regarding women's concerns with the focus on each group's peculiarities and the cultural, social, religious, racial and sexual diversity that is very much a part of the reality women around the world. The third wave of the feminist movement could be considered the continuation of the two previous phases of the movement, but also a response to their failures. In other words, first and second-wave feminism did not take into account the views and needs of women who were not white, heterosexual, and fairly well-off, living in industrialized countries. Sherin Saadallah states that as we try to define third wave feminism, we may also want to redefine feminism, as feminism should be defined by emancipatory activism rather than by an ethno-specific ideal type. She concludes her essay saying that "[t]his is where Muslim feminism finds its strengths and this is why Muslim feminism is one of the many voices of third wave feminism" (225).

It comes as a surprise to many Western women and Western feminists to learn that there is, and has been, a strong Arab feminist movement in the Middle East. Susan Muaddi Darraj claims that whenever she uses the term "Arab feminism," it generally elicits such questions from American feminists as "Can you be a feminist if you're still

veiled?” and “How can a Muslim woman be a feminist if she shares her husband with three other wives?” (190). Such biased comments are just an instance of Eurocentric feminism. It is not much well known in Western media that the multiplicity of Islam generates various feminist discourses. One is that coming from within the Islamist movement itself (with the belief that the existing Islamic interpretations, without any other channels or methods of thinking, are sufficient to defend the rights of women and consolidation), the second one is Muslim feminism and, finally, a third speech, secular feminism (which advocates a complete detachment of the Islamic discourse).

## 2. PROPOSED LESSON PLANS:

### 2.1 Preliminary issues.

In Spain, teachers in Secondary Education are forced by law<sup>161</sup> to include the teaching of values such as peace, cooperation, gender equality and cross-cultural communication, among others, into every course syllabi. In the second part of this paper, I suggest a series of activities addressed to students in second level of Bachillerato, that is, pupils between 17-18 years old, in an ESL classroom. We will deal with the topic of gender and cross-cultural communication during a week in the month of March, to celebrate the international women’s day, taking into consideration that sessions are distributed into three periods of one hour each.

### 2.2 Main objectives:

- Identify paternalism.
- Avoid biased interpretations of Muslim women.

### 2.3 Contents:

- Gender and culture stereotypes.
- Difference between Ideology/politics and culture/religion.

### 2.4 Original activities proposed:

#### 2.4.1. First session:

##### WARM-UP

1. Brainstorming: Spend one minute writing down all of the different words you associate with the words ‘Muslim women’.

2. Share your words with your partners. Together, decide if the image of the Muslim woman is often stereotyped. Discuss the concepts: stereotype and prejudice.

Definition of stereotype: something conforming to a fixed or general pattern; especially, a standardized mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgment.

Definition of prejudice: (1): preconceived judgment or opinion (2): an adverse opinion or leaning formed without just grounds or before sufficient knowledge (3): an irrational attitude of hostility directed against an individual, a group, a race, or their supposed characteristics.

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<sup>161</sup> “Ley Orgánica 2/2006, de 3 de mayo, de Educación.” *Boletín Oficial del Estado* 106 (May 2006). [http://www.boe.es/aeboe/consultas/bases\\_datos/doc.php?id=BOE-A-2006-7899](http://www.boe.es/aeboe/consultas/bases_datos/doc.php?id=BOE-A-2006-7899) See, especially, preliminary title, chapter 1, article 1; title I, chapter III, articles 22c, 22d, 25-4; title II, chapter II, article 80-2; title IV, chapter III, articles 127 g, 33; title VIII, chapter I, articles 157-4<sup>th</sup>-2, -25<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, 1<sup>st</sup>-8, 1<sup>st</sup>-9, which promote equality in the diversity.

## LISTENING

Screening of the short film “Submission, Part I” (10:52 minutes) in English with subtitles.

## LISTENING COMPREHENSION

TRUE / FALSE. According to the film, decide which of these sentences are true (T) or false (F):

- a. Women under Islam are submitted to men T / F
- b. The protagonist suffered a terrible illness when she was ten T / F
- c. All Muslim women are oppressed by their families T / F
- d. A lot of people in Somalia became tired of male politicians T / F
- e. Women’s groups said gender equality is possible T / F
- f. The protagonist feels happy because she married the man she loved T / F
- g. The Quran justifies violence against women, as it explicitly states that men and women are not equal in the eyes of God T / F
- h. Use of the *hijab*, or head scarf, is optional and varies according to the society in which a Muslim woman lives T / F
- i. The protagonist shows Arabic calligraphy around her body, which promotes dignity to all human beings T / F
- j. The restrictions placed on women in some Islamic countries are ideological (political), and not cultural or religious T / F

After this exercise is done, the teacher will dismantle stereotypes and prejudices that the film promotes.<sup>162</sup> Then, the teacher will have them revisit the true/false statements and make corrections based on what they learn from her/his explanation.

HOMEWORK: Are all Muslim women victims of gender violence? Are all Muslim men aggressive? In pairs, find out about the cases of Gonzalo Gironés (Valencia) and Kamal Mostafá (Fuengirola) and answer this question:

Are both cases similar in spite of their different religions?

### 2.4.2. Second session:

#### WARM-UP

1. Discuss your homework findings as a class.
2. Conclusions (definition of the terms “ideology vs culture” by the teacher). Make sure students understand the difference between a cultural practice and a religious practice, explaining that many of the oppressive practices that they may have associated with Islam in fact do not come from the religion but are part of a local tradition promoted by misogynist leaders.

#### READING

The "third world difference" includes a paternalistic attitude towards women in the third world. Third world women as a group or category are automatically and necessarily defined as: religious (read "not progressive"), family-oriented (read "traditional"), legal minors (read "they-are-still-not-conscious-of-their rights"), illiterate (read "ignorant"), domestic (read "backward") and sometimes revolutionary (read "their-country-is-in-a-state-of-war-they must-fight!"). This is how the "third world difference" is produced.

The category of "sexually oppressed women" is defined through Eurocentric assumptions because it reinforces the assumption that people in the third world just have

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<sup>162</sup> Use *Jusová's* “Hirsi Ali and van Gogh’s Submission: Reinforcing the Islam vs. Women Binary” (2008), and Navarro’s “Acusaciones al Islam en tiempos de cólera: el caso de Ayaan Iris Ali” (2009) for an interpretation of the film, both in English and Spanish.

not evolved to the extent that the West has. By homogenizing and systematizing the experiences of different groups of women in these countries, we stereotype non-white women as if they were all the same (Mohanty: 352, adapted for young students by Navarro).

## VOCABULARY

### SYNONYM MATCH:

- |                  |                 |
|------------------|-----------------|
| 1. religious     | a. advancing    |
| 2. progressive   | b. minor        |
| 3. traditional   | c. private      |
| 4. child         | d. convencional |
| 5. ignorant      | e. humble       |
| 6. domestic      | f. rebellious   |
| 7. backward      | g. unaware      |
| 8. revolutionary | h. devout       |

### ANTONYM MATCH:

- |                   |                 |
|-------------------|-----------------|
| 1. illiterate     | a. Industrial   |
| 2. savage         | b. Educated     |
| 3. underdeveloped | c. Other        |
| 4. good           | d. Civilized    |
| 5. Native         | e. Unprejudiced |
| 6. misogynist     | f. liberated    |
| 7. oppressed      | g. evil         |
| 8. self           | h. exotic       |

### 2.4.3. Third session:

#### WARM-UP

CHAT: In pairs / groups, decide which of these topics are most interesting and which are most boring.

*Pride in one's gender / female politicians / huge progress / elections / being fed up / women's groups / backward thinking / religion / cross-cultural communication*

Have a chat about the topics you liked, using the comparative and superlative forms. Change topics and partners frequently.

#### EXPLORE WOMEN IN HISTORY

In groups, find Arab women who made a difference and create a collage board which can be posted at the door (so that students can share their work with the whole high school). Students will use the Internet to record as much of the following information as possible:

- How did she reflect the culture of her time?
- How did she rise above it?
- Family background/social status
- Level of education

#### E-MAIL WRITING

Have students contact various Muslim women's groups in the US and UK, such as the Muslim Women's League ([www.mwluca.org](http://www.mwluca.org)), through e-mail in order to gather information for this group project.

Suggested personalities:

<b>Name</b>	<b>Time Period</b>	<b>Region</b>
Khadija, wife of Muhammad	c. 564-619	present-day Saudi Arabia
Aisha bint Abu Bakr, wife of Muhammad	613-78	present-day Saudi Arabia
Fatima, daughter of Muhammad	c. 606-32	present-day Saudi Arabia
Rabia al-Adawiyya, the first Sufi	c. 712-801	Iraq
Walladah bint Mustakfi	c. 1001-1080	Córdoba, Spain
Queen Arwa	1052-1137	Yemen
Razia Sultana	d. 1240	India
Shajarat al-Durr	d. 1259	Egypt
Roxelana, Hurrem Sultan	16th century	Ottoman Empire
Queen Amina	1560-1610	Zaria, Africa
Nur Jahan	1577-1645	India
Zaynab al-Ghazali	1918-	Egypt
Nawal El Saadawi	1931-	Egypt
Fatima Mernissi	1940-	Morocco
Khaleda Zia	1945-	Bangladesh
Tansu Ciller	1946-	Turkey
Sheikh Hasina Wajed	1947-	Bangladesh
Queen Noor	1951-	Jordan
Benazir Bhutto	1953-2007	Pakistan
Laila Ali	1978-	United States

#### 2.4.4. Evaluation

JOURNAL WRITING: List three things you've learned about women in Islam that you did not know before.

As a class, discuss what students have learned about women in Islam. Ask students what, if anything, surprised them. Have students go back and review the list they brainstormed in the introductory activity and ask them if their views on women in Islam have changed.

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