# Positionality, Critical Methodologies, and Pedagogy: Teaching Gender and Politics in Morocco

Katja Žvan Elliott

Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane
Email: k.zvan-elliott@aui.ma

Scholarship on critical pedagogy is mostly written from within the democratic and neoliberal North American and British contexts (Giroux 2003, 2004, 2010; McCusker 2017; Mehta 2019). Geraldine McCusker (2017, 447) eloquently sums up the aim of this scholarship as "to establish a schooling system that emancipated those oppressed and disempowered. Critical pedagogues aim to provide space for critical engagement with divergent perspectives in order to support students from disenfranchised populations to understand the impact of capitalism, gender, race and homophobia on their lives."

However, authors such as Henry A. Giroux problematize the notion of the Western democracies as they are undermined by the onslaught of neoliberalism. There, as in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region, democracy is "the site of struggle itself" (Giroux 2004, 500)—the site for intersectional race, gender, class struggle, and greater justice. Feminist and/or critical pedagogies[1] employed in the classroom present a venue for learning about and discussing these struggles or, as Akanksha Mehta (2019, 26–27) argues, for "(un)learning racist colonial ideas/lenses … and gendered binaries."

My classrooms are set in the Moroccan public fee-paying Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane (AUI). The university has historically catered to middle- and upper-class Moroccans who can afford such fees. AUI offers a gender studies minor that attracts a very small number of students. Only a few gender classes are offered throughout the academic year, which students can also take as electives. My course, Gender and Politics of the Modern Middle East, is offered every three semesters at the graduate and undergraduate levels. The university's stated institutional values promote "*responsible* freedom of expression" (AUI 2021; emphasis added). This has consequences for the implementation of critical pedagogy in classrooms. Whereas my students have never been censored in the classroom, they are aware that outside the campus gates,

neoliberal, semiauthoritarian, and patriarchal relations rule. State authorities punish "irresponsible" freedom of expression by harassing and imprisoning political opposition to the regime.

This article shows how Morocco's semiauthoritarian political context conditions instructors' attempts to apply a critical pedagogical approach that focuses on positionality. I do so by introducing my personal story as an entry point to my teaching approach, before engaging with the classroom and the challenges of such an approach.

## On Positionality

Most of my students do not come from disenfranchised communities, and thus they have a different experience with inequalities and justice than their less fortunate counterparts or the students in McCusker's and Mehta's articles; yet they are citizens of a semiauthoritarian state. As such, it is important to engage with the concepts of positionality. As D. Soyini Madison (2005, 14) powerfully argues,

> Positionality is vital because it forces us to acknowledge our own power, privilege, and biases just as we denounce the power structures that surround our subjects. … When we turn back on ourselves, we examine our intentions, our methods, and our possible effects. We are accountable for our research paradigms, our authority, and our moral responsibility to representation and interpretation.

Such critical approaches to pedagogy and research became central to my work because of my own positionality.

I was born in socialist Yugoslavia. The world I grew up in was a world where people, both women and men, were gainfully employed. Many people were blue-collar workers, but, like my white-collar parents, they had equal workers' rights, access to quality health care and education, and the right to retire with a decent pension. Yugoslavia enshrined the right to abortion as a human right in its constitution in 1974. However, the state was not feminist, and, like other authoritarian states, it maintained a strong repressive apparatus. Nonetheless, since I was a child, I lived in an environment that fostered social solidarity, where people complained about the low salaries but also recognized the benefits of a strong welfare system and women's employment.[2]

Coming to Morocco to carry out my first fieldwork in 2006, I was perplexed by the blank stares of people when I asked them what they expected from their state and government to address their dire situation. They either did not understand my question, or they answered with a simple "nothing." It only later dawned on me that although we share the experience of living in authoritarian states, my life was different because of the welfare system and the government's proactive support for the integration of women into the public sphere and job market (Sitar 2017, 52). I look at my grandmother's and mother's trajectories, both of whom came from poor and rural backgrounds, and compare them with those of

my research participants—women from lower socioeconomic communities in Morocco. While my grandmother and mother looked to the state for support, women in Morocco look to their families, who oftentimes cannot provide even a roof above their heads because they themselves are struggling to survive.

Many students repeat the prevailing metanarratives to understand poverty or the lack of progress on human rights in the region as inevitable outcomes of cultural constraints and underdevelopment, such as nonliteracy, lack of awareness of rights, and poverty (Žvan Elliott 2020). My research demonstrates the opposite: I find that although women are aware of their legal rights and the available mechanisms, the reason why women do not often pursue them is the way they are treated by street-level bureaucrats, and the humiliation they have to endure because they are nonliterate and poor (Žvan Elliott 2015, 2020).

By sharing my story of growing up in a socialist authoritarian system, I demonstrate to my students how that experience shapes my research on women's poverty in Morocco. It also provides an example of how reflecting on our positionality can lead us to change the prevailing narratives of poverty, women's rights, and power relations, as well as find solutions to the plight of those less fortunate in our societies. It pushes students to rethink these metanarratives, to understand why and how nonliterate and poor women have been misrepresented, and to examine why policies addressing poverty alleviation have been in(su)efficient. As Madison (2005, 4) writes, "Representation has consequences: how people are represented is how they are treated." This poignantly applies to the representation of gender in the MENA and Muslim women's struggle for equality inside and outside the region.[3]

## Classroom Strategies

Education based on critical pedagogy plays an important part in realizing democracy as a social justice project. It enables "students to take seriously questions on how they ought to live their lives, uphold the ideals of a just society, and act upon the promises of a strong democracy" (Giroux 2010, 195). My Gender and Politics of the Modern Middle East class incorporates such ideas and aims. Students are first introduced to both theoretical discussions and women's lived experiences in the Global South. Such an introduction teaches them how to listen and give voice to those whose lives have been marginalized and belittled because of misrepresentations. By learning about positionality, students can turn the gaze onto themselves to *see* the oppressed and the disempowered within their societies. This, in turn, helps them understand what Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 154) meant when she asked, "how can the claims that 'women are,' 'women believe' and 'women need' be made when such claims are inapplicable or unresponsive to the needs, interests and experiences of women?" Through this, they become aware of the politics of representation (Abu Lughod 2020; Said 1978; Yeğenoğlu 1998) and the politics of knowledge production (Ackerly and True 2010; Wyrtzen and Guhin 2013).

The class begins by introducing work on orientalism and continues with feminist research ethics (Ackerly and True 2010) and critical race methodology

(Solórzano and Yosso 2002), as two examples of scholarly nonpositivist ethical frameworks. These discussions help students understand the role of power relations in knowledge production, researchers' positionality, and research as social activism, and to realize that gender on its own does not explain women's (or men's) experiences within a system. It also pushes them to acknowledge how in many ways they are much more privileged and have more rights than their male counterparts, let alone women from lower socioeconomic classes. Combining these perspectives with an intersectional approach to topics relating to the colonial state and gender, patriarchy and authoritarianism, political economy, family laws (Muslim, Christian, and Jewish), Islam and gender, masculinities, and sexualities urges students not only to challenge the prevailing metanarratives, but also to expose the elites' appropriation of culture and religion to maintain political and economic power as well as patriarchal relations.

As part of teaching students how to reflect on their own positionality vis-à-vis gender and politics, I ask them to write a series of journals. These journals are written in the first person, and they are quite intimate. They expose students' emotions, biases, thoughts, and experiences and show how to transform their ways of thinking as well as how to transform their community and society. Students also conduct a research project for which they interview people of different socioeconomic classes, genders, ethnic backgrounds, and/or sexualities on one of the topics covered in class. Students may submit their work as podcasts, free-verse poetry, short stories, and graphic novels. As part of this assignment, I also ask them to submit a self-reflective essay that allows them to think about the myriad ways their own positionality and subjectivities have impacted their experience with data production.

Such an onerous learning process and deep reflection enable students to challenge their own representations about people. It shows them how these representations impact their interactions with different groups in society and shape their view of religion, culture, and state. This new knowledge leads them to seek alternatives to the current neoliberal empowerment model that focuses on the individual rather than the welfare and wellbeing of the society.

## Conclusion

As bell hooks (2015, 95) argued that "feminist pedagogy should engage students in a learning process that makes the world 'more rather than less real.'" In a semiauthoritarian context, such as Morocco, making the world more real involves making students more vulnerable to potential state repression. However, as Paulo Freire (2017, 23) wrote, "[l]iberation is … a childbirth, and a painful one." A feminist critical pedagogy may not be innovative in so-called Western settings, but in Morocco, where the educational system is based on authoritarian and patriarchal relations steeped in rote memorization, it is not only innovative but also subversive.

My role in such a classroom is to provide targeted reading of materials to expose students to critical methodologies and theories, providing the space for vulnerability that comes with new realizations in the form of classroom

discussions, journals, and critical ethnographic projects. Many of my students take this knowledge and their renewed sense of social commitment and become activists through campus organizations, such as Amnesty International, WeEmpower, as well as through nongovernmental organizations in their hometowns. Others express their views by producing their own podcast series and posting critical content on social media. Many, unfortunately, give up and move to the Global North, as their aspiration to be part of democratic change often clashes with the expectations of their state and society to maintain the status quo.

## Notes

**1.** I use the terms "feminist" and "critical pedagogies" interchangeably.
**2.** A Slovene feminist scholar, Lilijana Burcar (2015), for example, wrote about repatriarchialization of postsocialist societies in their transition to capitalism.
**3.** Literature on the representation of Muslim women is quite rich. This is necessarily a very shortened list: Abu Lughod (1986, 2013); Ahmed (1993, 2011); Charrad and Stephen (2020); Mahmood (2004); Mernissi (1988).

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**Katja Žvan Elliott** is Associate Professor at Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane: k.zvan-elliott@aui.ma