



Beyond the canon: un-learning the “Muslim woman” in UK higher education classroom with a “pedagogy of opacity”

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Abstract

My contribution to this special issue is non-orthodox. Far from Islamic Feminism’s hermeneutics, and bearing in mind the limitations of anthropological works and representative paradigms in Orientalist critique, I take cues from postcolonial scholar Edouard Glissant’s (1990) seminal work, *Poetics of Relations*, notably his notions of *détour*, *retour*, and *érrance*, and draw on my experience in teaching gender studies in relation to the Middle East in UK higher education institutions to posit a “pedagogy of opacity” when producing knowledge on Othered bodies—in this instance, the fictive category of the “Muslim woman”. We see how a pedagogy of opacity forces home, self, and early mis/information about the other to realign and confront each other. This triadic realignment showcases the workings of home (the UK)—not of a geographically distant Islamic culture—in the manufacturing of the Muslim woman Other.

Keywords Opacity · Pedagogy · Glissant · Un-learning · Muslim woman

Writing in 1988, Haraway (1988:581) cautioned us against positivist sciences’ god-trick of an all-seeing eye. In her words:

The eyes have been used to signify a perverse capacity – honed to perfection in the history of science tied to militarism, capitalism, colonialism, and male supremacy – to distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power.

The workings of vision as a privileged sense that allows for presumably objective and finite knowledge, or what Bubandt et al. (2019) term “the empire of the gaze”, constitute the main premise of this work. Bubandt et al. (2019) survey the existing literature on optics to showcase the supremacy of seeing in the process of knowledge-making from the colonial era to our present time. We learn from our authors that who does the seeing and who/what is made in/visible, in part or in whole, are

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not physiological functions strictly speaking. Seeing, in the context of Empire, is a tool for disciplining and controlling both the human and the non-human, the first step before knowing, categorizing, labelling, and ultimately governing.

In line with our authors who invite us to embrace the “invisible dimensions of Social life” to understand our contemporary world better (Ibid, p. 11), I make the case in this work for a “pedagogy of opacity” to showcase the violent workings of the “Western gaze” intense preoccupation with the “Muslim woman”, the quintessential Othered figure that both liberals and conservatives converge on in their articulation of the enlightened subject and the protection of Europe’s borders, respectively. The inseparability of the pedagogical and the political, I argue, is particularly useful for re-instilling humanity back into western imaginary’s abject Others. Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008:234) conceive the abject as an “uninhabitable subject position, eliciting shame and disgust that must be cast outside the sense of self and identity”. In the case of the Muslim woman, her presumed original home, be it Arabness, Islam, or else, continues to be at the mercy of the necropolitics of US (and its allies) foreign policies, with the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the ongoing economic sanctions on Iran, and recent interventions in Syria and Lybia being evident examples.

In what follows, I show how my students and I relegate the “right to opacity” (Glissant, 1990) to the “Muslim woman” by acknowledging our very own opaqueness when encountering her Otherness. Far from canonical approaches,¹ be it hermeneutics, anthropological works, or Orientalist representative paradims, we take cue from postcolonial scholar Glissant (1990, 1997) seminal work, *Poetics of Relations*, notably his notions of “*détour*” and “*érrance*”, to un-learn the ahistorical, generalist deployments, linear definitions, and overt presentism that fictionalize the category of the “Muslim woman” in the imaginary, national and foreign policy work of western hegemonic powers. I evoke fictiveness here to emphasize the breadth and scope to which the convergence of Islam with the category of woman, one that spans continents and histories, nations and peoples, and races and creeds, has been reduced, in the western imaginary, to a singular visual configuration (i.e., the veil) from which all nuances have been removed.

The hypervisibility of the “Muslim woman”, by virtue of her veil, renders her immediately knowable, or “transparent” in Glissant’s terms, and subsequently categorizable along a spectrum of securitized bodies. The construction of the Muslim woman as a fixed category that is knowable beyond her “simultaneously attractive and repulsive” veil (Yegenoglu 1998:46) has direct consequences on her lived reality and her wider community. The epistemic project of the “Muslim woman”, however, is not only artificial, but also intrusive because it requires that she first be emptied from her indigenous belief system, her ways of doing and seeing, and her attempts at self-making, hence my insistence on its fictiveness. In their place, we find a plethora of securitized discursive annexations that range from “ugly” to “terrorist”, in addition to populist framings of Islam and western as oxymoronic.

¹ I am not a specialist of the Islamic canon, let alone being trained in theological parlance. One common denominator this work holds in relation to the Islamic canon is its ability to invoke the concept of *Ghayb*, given both *Ghayb* and opacity’s emphasis on invisibility. This commonality, however, is beyond the scope of this work, and I leave it to the more knowledgeable reader to dive into a comparative exercise between the notion of opacity, as presented by Glissant, and the notion of *Ghayb*. I recommend Bubandt et al. (2019) and Mittermaier (2019) for a thorough exploration of the latter.

For my students and I, to learn about the Muslim woman is tantamount to “letting go” of the knowledges that have hitherto shaped *our* understandings of *her*. There lies then at the heart of knowing, a fundamentally relational process. Following Glissant (1990, 1997), *Relation* is a non-hierarchical dynamic that connects one and Other whilst preserving their differences. For the Other whose humanity, mythology/ies, and ecologies have been replaced with quick facts sheets, quantifiable data, and eugenics, under the guise of civilizing missions and capitalist expansionism, Glissant (1990) maintains their “right to opacity” whenever they find themselves negotiating their relationships with others. In Glissant’s words² (in Britton 1999:19):

If we look at the process of ‘understanding’ beings and ideas as it operates in western society, we find that it is founded on an insistence on this kind of transparency. In order to ‘understand’ and therefore accept you, I must reduce your density to this scale of conceptual measurement which gives me a basis for comparisons and perhaps for judgements.

Opacity, then, is an act of refusal. It is a wilfully erected shield that resists assimilationist projects at the cognitive, spiritual, and socio-political levels. It is the right to make oneself knowable according to the terms they set themselves, irrespective of and despite Eurocentric conventions. The panic that the Muslim Other produces in the western psyche is, above all, the result of a long history that constructs it as unyielding except to its itself, a sort of epistemic void, so to speak.

In what follows, I first introduce the reader to the various layers and textures that constitute my classroom. I then elaborate on the category of the “Muslim woman” to relate the main methodological and conceptual challenges that emerge in her regard. I follow by drawing upon selected cases and occurrences to showcase my “pedagogy of opacity” in practice. I pay attention to how “*détour*” and “*errantry*”, two major notions in the work of Glissant, manifest in the classroom. I show how they provide us with the tools to rethink the very way we think about and relate to our subjects of study, since they compel us to question our very locus of intervention (Mignolo, 2011) and the intentions that lie behind our want to learn.

The classroom

In this section, I extend on the textures and layers that comprise my classroom. This contextualizing exercise, where I bring forth the differences that permeate my classroom, is important to capture the full scope of detouring and errantry as pedagogical tools that effect opacity and compel students to think twice about the ongoing implications of the colonial matrix of power (Quijano, 1998) in the context of quick-fix depictions of the “Muslim woman”.

² I occasionally use Celia Britton’s translation of Glissant’s work from French to English instead of Betsy Wing’s translation, which has become the conventional text for reading Glissant in English. Britton’s postcolonial training aligns better with my own writing because it translates Glissant’s postcolonial context in addition to his work.

I have been teaching gender and sexuality studies with reference to the Middle East in UK higher education institutions (HEI) for at least a decade at both the undergraduate and the postgraduate levels. For this work, I focus on my experience in teaching undergraduate students in their second and third year.

Often, my classroom consists of female British students, mostly white, with the occasional exchange student from Europe, and a handful of First Generation³ British Muslim female students. Rarely, though not unheard of, a male student or two sign up to my class. Rather than quantify my classroom, I highlight the categories of race, gender, and migration status as catalysts that inform mine and my students' biases and the latter's epistemic implications. Such hasty understandings often manifest in the early days of the classroom and it is my responsibility, as educator, to be mindful of the slippery slope of hierarchizing oppression, something that often erupts in higher education spaces (see Aouragh, 2019). In addition, it is imperative that we do not affix certain expectations to certain bodies. I explain.

It is easy to presume, since most of the students and I are "women", and I use the term "women" loosely here, that there results an immediate degree of reciprocity or familiarity between us. Likewise, it is naive to presume that a Muslim student is well-versed in the innumerable material, legal, or socio-political divergences that ensue from "being Muslim" or "living a Muslim life". In any case, I am always careful to not spotlight particular bodies when discussing particular topics. It is not the responsibility of the black student to complicate our understanding of racial inequalities, and the onus is not on the white student when we discuss white privilege. It is certainly not the responsibility of the Muslims students to "defend" Islam from orientalist tropes. To do so would reproduce racialized mis/information that reduce specific nationalities, ethnicities, or religions to an alleged truth under the pretence of "culture", one that is presumed to be fixed and immune to the rapid material, technological, and environmental changes observed worldwide. Also, when these categories intersect with further ones, notably class, or combine with additional factors, such as one's household's general attitude toward higher education, all sort of equations emerge.

You see, when one teaches issues related to gender and sexuality, the intimate and the macro levels are in constant dialogue with each other. Navigating the cost of period products in the absence of disposable income, debating the relevancy or not of pre-meditation in cases of "honour killings" and "crimes of passion", and evaluating the utility of gender quotas as a first step toward enhancing women's political participation are an example of a topical assemblage that could arise during one lesson. Indeed, an array of seemingly unrelated topics will pop up every now and then in this work. In line with Glissant's work, and far from the author's (mine) presumed errancy (not to be confused with Glissant's notion of "errantry"), I show their inter-relatedness by unveiling their function as "detours" that compel us to revisit our locus of intervention and question the extent to which our cognitive processes are racialized.

These detours, however, are not divergences. They are minute movement in a formidable rhizome of knowledge that is ever expanding. In the classroom, their constant renewals and regenerations uncover reparative cartographies of knowledge where presumed

³ First Generation means that neither of the students' parents have completed higher education, let alone received a degree.

facts about the Other, territories, memories, selves, and histories are anything but aligned. Like Shohat (2002:79), they beg us to ask: “What kind of relational maps of knowledge would help illuminate the negotiation of gender and sexuality as understood in diverse contexts, but with an emphasis on the linked historical experiences and discursive networks across borders?” Shohat is not only cautioning us against the isolation of gender from further societal categories, notably religion in the case of the “Muslim woman”, but she is equally weary of the siloization of areas of studies into seemingly auto-defined and distinct geographies that are impermeable to change or of little concern to each other.

On a more logistical level, my courses are usually limited to 12 weeks in total, and account for 15 credits (out of 120 credits/year). This limitation reflects the neoliberal university’s logic, which seeks to maximize the number of optional modules, under the pretence of richness and variety, thus making its degrees more marketable.⁴ Oftentimes, my classroom is students’ first experience of and encounter with a course that questions the objectivity of knowledge, shuns definitions, and prioritizes deconstruction over absolutism, the very foundations of critical feminist thinking, whose aim is to think through the interminable inequalities that plight our planet. Since social struggles are pedagogical spaces to be learnt, un-learnt, and ultimately acted upon, it goes without saying that I incorporate in my teaching praxis that are capable of effecting change. This is evident in the kind of assessments that students produce. Rather than write essays, higher education’s ultimate format for assessing students’ knowledge on a particular topic, students write a reflection piece where they review their (un-)learning journey and produce a Summative Project (SP) as their final work.⁵ The SP is a written submission of 2000 words or its equivalent in minutes. It generally consists of reviews, video or photo essays, podcasts, play scripts, short stories, poetry or spoken word, and/or original artwork such as pottery, painting, and the sort. For the SP, the criteria of dissemination beyond the classroom and public engagement are on par with critical analysis when assessing students’ work. Such an approach echoes Catherine Walsh (2019:215) who stresses “actional” pedagogies for “imagining and building a different world”. Having introduced the reader to my classroom, I now reflect on the limitations of the main paradigms that we encounter in the study of Muslim subjectivity/ies; the first step in my exercise of relating opacity as pedagogy for un-learning the “Muslim woman” in the classroom.

Beyond the canon

The quintessential conceptual framework that guides any course dedicated to the study of gender and sexuality in the contemporary Middle East is, most peers and informed readers would agree, Edward Said’s (1978) *Orientalism*, both as discourse and critique.

⁴ See Mehta (2019) for a succinct exploration of the neoliberal university’s impact on critical pedagogy.

⁵ Between parentheses, I “inherited” the course, so to speak, and although I was given the option to modify the format of the assessments, I decided to retain it. I have since extended the non-essay format to further courses I teach. For a thorough engagement with the pedagogical aspect of practical assessments, see Chappell et al. (2021).

Orientalism as discourse is rife with representation paradigms. There is something eerie about the fixity and permanency of Orientalist aesthetics that effortlessly flow from one century into the next: from the seventh-century humble oil paintings to contemporary multi-million dollars Hollywood productions. On the plus side, visuals provide a useful optic for understanding the continuity of epistemic violence. In contrast, students risk remaining preoccupied with Orientalism's optical dimension, at the expense of latent and lesser visible dehumanization processes at play.

The literature is rife with works that have explored the teaching/learning of Islam in western, non-western, and Muslim diasporic settings (Ali, 2011; Elbih, 2015; Hossain, 2013; Merchant, 2016; Muedini, 2012; Wheeler, 2002; Zayzafoon, 2011). Unsurprisingly, these works emphasize the importance of historicizing to counter presentism and further "conceptual sins" in the study of both the "Middle East" (Davis, 2010) and "gender" in the "Middle East" (Allouche, 2019; Mikdashi, 2012). Such works, though not prioritizing the "question of the Muslim woman", remain important, owing to the centrality of Orientalist discourse and critique to each and all. Still, several authors have recounted their experience with Orientalist encounters in the classroom, whereby students simply dismiss the authority and/or expertise of the gendered and racialized teacher (Abdo, 2002; Ashutosh & Winders, 2009; Laforteza, 2009; Pathak et al., 1991), and I found much reciprocity between their experiences and mine. This invisible harm compels us to contemplate the ethical implications of uncritical western-centric pedagogies vis-à-vis "Muslim women" (Taylor & Zine, 2014). I hope to add to this literature the use of opacity as a pedagogy that decentres Europe and posits knowledge as a relational project where permanent dialogue, not absolute truths or facts, constitutes its ultimate goal.

As far as this Special Issue is concerned, a canonical approach would expect me to engage with the liberatory potential of Islamic thought and hermeneutics, in line with Islamic Feminism (Wadud, 1999; Badran, 2001). Whereas Islamic Feminism, as a space of epistemic engagement, could be said to embody a decolonial element given its non-Eurocentric starting point, a commonality it shares with Glissant's work, it confines any analysis that follows to a fixed canon that reaffirms Muslimness as the sole subjectivation process at work. This reductionism, importantly, coincides with liberalist attitudes towards the "Muslim woman" problem.

Scholars, activists, Muslim-majority societies, me, my students, including Muslim ones, can all be guilty of reiterating liberalist attitudes that are certainly not confined to western geographies. Seen through an intersectional lens, liberal discourse abounds in economically privileged southern geographies and is often deployed in a copy/paste fashion that does not attend to the postcolonial condition and unresolved businesses that continue to impact their context. The late Nawaal Al-Saadawi infamously removed entire chapters deemed too anti-imperial and anti-capitalist for her new-found audience when her work entered a white, liberal, and English-speaking realm, to the detriment of Arab intellectuals and audiences alike (Amireh, 2000).

In contrast, Deeb and Harb (2013) recognize the prejudice and othering that the larger Lebanese society, notably liberalists and modernists, directs toward its Shi'a

population. Their work, where they explore the “flexible morality” that young (Shi’a) Muslims in Beirut draw upon in their navigation of leisure and morality, successfully nuances the presumed rigidity of Islam, notably its inability to wield fun,⁶ and the reader is left appreciative of the resonance they find between themselves and their participants when navigating the complexities of public life. Deeb and Harb (2013) coincide with the work of Kassem (2021) who conceives “anti-Muslim racism”, also in Lebanon, to address the dehumanization of veiled women and their perceived “backwardness” by mainstream Lebanese society. Deeb and Harb (2013) and Kassem (2021) compel us to move beyond north-south racialization processes and pay attention to their manifestation and production in south-south contexts. This intellectual absence in anti-racist scholarship is curious, to say the least, given that it gives credence to and accelerates anti-Muslim rhetoric.

In addition, all three authors could be said to heed the call of anthropologist Schielke (2010) who infamously warned in 2010 that “There is too much Islam in the anthropology of Islam” to point out the disproportionate attention given to questions of piety and morality in studies concerned with Muslim subjects, and rightly concludes that much of these studies reduce the Muslim to that of, well, “Muslim”. The anthropological studies that Schielke takes issue with not only erase the density of the Muslim subject to an abstract Islam, they also run the risk of being misappropriated and recycled by “femonationalists” (Farris, 2017), a curious assemblage in western-European nation-states whereby right wing realpolitik and progressive feminist activists coalesce “in the name of saving Muslim women”.

Taken together, these authors encapsulate Moore’s (Moore, 1994:57) reading of the subject as always “engendered”, a site of “multiple differences and subjectivities and competing identities”. When relocated to the confines of the UK higher education classroom, it becomes apparent to the teacher (me) that it is precisely the unfathomability of the Muslim—any Muslim—beyond their Muslimness that constructs the latter as impossibly queer (Fernandez-Carbajal, 2019), or permanently in suspension mode in relation to Europe (El-Tayeb, 2011; Hall, 1991), two points I return to in the section that follows.

To think with the “Muslim woman”, then, is to recognize her agency, and to relocate it to “areas of resistance” and “(self-)empowerment” (Sehlikoglu 2018:75). Following her thorough surveying of the anthropological and ethnographic scholarship on Muslim and Middle Eastern women since the 1960s, Sehlikoglu calls for the exploration of “Muslim Women’s creative agency” (Sehlikoglu 2018:85), and, I would add, to think it creatively, something this piece wishes to achieve. In the next section, I delve into my pedagogy of opacity proper. I show how the notion of Islam unfolds in relation to the category of woman in the classroom and why a pedagogy that is adamant on opacity is effective in countering anti-Muslim discourse. I prioritize the work of Glissant, notably his notions of relation, detour, and errantry, whilst placing them in conversations with my teaching.

⁶ See also Bayat (2007) who coins the term “anti-fun-damentalism” in his critique of puritan interpretations of fun in Islam by theocratic states, religious men, and liberalists alike in Muslim-majority nation-states.

Opacity as pedagogy

To understand the full scope of opacity as a pedagogical tool, it is important to situate it in relation to the notions of detour (*détour*) and errantry (*érrance*), as they emerge in Edouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relations*, which was originally published in 1990 in French. At the core of Glissant's work is an uncompromising commitment to effect a non-hierarchical world in which difference is recognized but never appropriated. For Glissant, this can only be achieved once we submit ourselves to the *unknowability-of-it-all*. Here, it is imperative that we emphasize the postcolonial position from which Glissant writes, that is, the imposition of the modern nation-state as the ultimate mode of governance, and the obligatory annexation to the latter European settings and experiences of democracy and civility (read non-barbaric). It comes as little surprise that Koelble and Lipuma (2008) rightly state that "It is high time to 'democratize democracy'".

Glissant, well aware of the extent to which this imposition grew unchallenged and unchecked alongside an explosion in production scales, technological advancements, and unrestrained commodification at the global level, a reality he terms *chaos-monde* (chaos-world), he invites us to reimagine the chaos-world as a *tout-monde* (whole-world), that is, to contemplate our relation to each other, including other objects, non-humans, and ideas, through a relational poetic that shuns domination, embraces the unknown, and uses it as the foundation for an intellectual rhizomatic expansion that is ever evolving and widening inclusion:

But writing in the presence of all the world's languages does not mean knowing all the world's languages. It means that in the current context of [...] the chaos-world, I can no longer write in a monolingual way. Rather, I take my own language and I shake it up and shift it around, not into syntheses, but into linguistic openings that enable me to conceive of the relations between languages [...] – relations of dominance, of complicity, absorption, oppression, erosion, contact, etc. – as a huge drama [...] from which my own language cannot remain exempt and safe. (Glissant 2020:24)

In (very) lay terms, it is simply impossible to know the whole of the world, and that is "OK". For the western psyche, this approach is puzzling at best and farcical at worst; such is the extent of the scientification process that colonialism imposes (see Maldonado-Torres, 2011; Quijano, 1998).

Opacity, I argue, equips us with the tools needed to assert a pluriverse of worlds (Escobar, 2018), in contra to universalist liberalist accounts. It allows for a productive engagement with multiple nodes of differences whilst transforming the unknowable into an occasion for seriously pondering the power dynamics that sustain coloniality (Quijano, 1998), also known as the ugly side of modernity.

To insist upon the unknown is not to theorize from a gullible or an uninformed position. The longer I teach gender and sexuality in relation to the so-called Middle East, the more I am convinced that critique goes hand in hand with acquiescing to the unknowability of it all, contra to rigid Eurocentric learning methods. Knowing, after all, was the preferred *modus operandi* of colonial administrators.

When relocated to the microcosm that the classroom is, it helps that we remind ourselves that the “effect of specific affective, material, and discursive elements that are present [...] at the micro-political level of the school or university [are also present] at the macro-level of white colonial structures and practices [and vice versa]” (Zembylas 2018:91).

Where the Muslim woman is concerned, I always start the term with the classic question: “Why have you enrolled in this course, and what do you wish to gain from it?” Barring the couple of students who are not entirely clear on their decision, undoubtedly a case of privilege where one can experiment with 15 costly credits, most of the students are resolute about learning why notions of modernity seem to have escaped the so-called Middle East, its men, women, and “gays”. This is evident in my students’ intense preoccupation with “Muslim women’s” low level of employment, forced veiling, controlled sexuality, and female genital mutilation—important topics that have been successfully de-orientalized in the literature. My students often echo strong views on each of these matters and few ponder the presentism and ahistorical frameworks that inform their judgements.

To this end, I generally dedicate my first encounter (of 12) to a general knowledge quiz about the region with questions relating to Islam, culture, gender, and more trivial topics, including the ratio of broad beans to chickpeas in Falafel, for instance. The quiz displays a multitude of maps where students are invited to guess the many colours on display that distinguish one country from another or areas within the same country. It becomes imminently clear to me that students are not aware that Indonesia, which invokes images of partying, tanning on the beach, and luxurious all-inclusive resorts, counts the largest Muslim-majority population in the world; Turkey and Iran are not Arabic-speaking countries; the terminologies of Arab and Arabic are wrongly conjugated; Islam is not the sole confessional identity in the region; Arab-Jewish identities very much exist; and “sometimes a *hijab* is just a *hijab*, and sometimes it is not” (Mikdashi, 2012).

Détour/retour

To expose the material consequences of my students’ ignorant yet authoritatively asserted biases on the lived reality of the “Muslim woman”, I adopt Glissant’s method of *détour* (detour). Detouring is not synonymous with deflecting. In fact, a *détour* (detour), following Glissant, is always bound to a *retour* (return), with the assertion that the detouring consists, above all, of a remedying journey that is as complex and regenerative as nature’s rhizomatic foundations. It is an orientation that is capable of mustering the myriad events, histories, occurrences, co-optations, and refusals that have preceded or continue to persist in relation to a specific knowledge, before it finally conjures an answer (i.e., return). The question of whether the conjured answer is whole or not is not as important, following Glissant’s logic, as the question of whether it preserves the Other’s “right to opacity” or not. Once again, opacity is not meant to deflect or distort, although such tactics can and have been utilized by indigenous people in the face of colonizers for their own safety, and Glissant (1990, 1997) does attend to them in several works. As Koobak et al. (2021:92)

assert: “To work with the concept of opacity is not to confound or to diverge from matters of accountability but to create spaces of re-existence and change”.

In practice, I revisit an array of historical junctures and UK and US foreign policy milestones that have impacted the epistemic project that the fictive Muslim woman is, whilst uncovering that which has been silenced. Among them, I cite a critical reading of the infamous Sykes-Picot agreements, the firm colonial roots that construct the modern Middle East nation-state, the paternalist rhetoric of colonial rulers and local elites alike, the role of the state in constructing the nation—not vice versa—during the era of independence, the imposition of the Israeli state and the subsequent un-Arabization of Jewishness, western states’ shameless support of freedom-suppressing regimes, the endless flaws of the Oslo “peace” accords, the long-term implications of unregulated western-backed structural adjustments, the specificity of “Third World protests” (Rao, 2010), “competitive authoritarianism” (Levitsky & Way, 2010) in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq, and the personal writings of women, men, and everything in between, to name a few.

This long detour, where I situate the “Muslim woman” in relation to numerous historical junctures, unquestionably muddies and complicates the readily available image of the veiled Muslim woman that my students are used to. It also uncovers the abyss-space that separates them from their subject of interest at both the intellectual and geographical levels. Lastly, it compels students to work through the opaqueness (not to be confused with Glissant’s notion of opacity) that characterizes decolonial un-learning, to name the long and winding road of re-stating the historical, re-introducing the context, and re-assessing western sources of knowledge as the sole voice of authority and knowledge. Still, this long detour is immediately followed by a return to one’s original point of enquiry; only this time, they are equipped with the epistemic tools that decentre their version of the story as the ultimate one.

Retour manifests in my classroom whenever my students and I are faced with instances of mistranslations. How notions, practices, customs, taste, and aesthetics travel from one context to another, I assert, has less to do with their presumed “real meaning” than with the journey itself: what gets discarded, appropriated, let go of, admitted, and refused entry along the journey? A critical engagement with translation sees past its functionality and recognizes its ability to “transform language from a tool of transfer to a statement reflecting power relations between the speakers of different social groups” (Zebdawi 2022:72). For example, my students and I trace the journey of the very same burkini worn by French Muslim women and Nigella Lawson (Aslam, 2016). Whereas the latter produces instances of amusement and speculation, the first allows the French state to reassert its sovereignty by targeting, yet again, female Muslim bodies. Likewise, we find in Daesh’s surreal level of violence against women, notably Ezidi women, and the so-called incels who demand their “right to sex” (Srinivasan, 2022) and go on to commit mass shootings if contradicted, two sides of the very same masculinist, conservative, populist, and nationalist rhetoric being observed worldwide. And when the UK state proposes a ban against hymenoplasty, we scrutinize instances of vaginoplasty, and further vaginal enhancements (Lewis, 2021). In each instance, we do not engage in limited “whataboutism”; rather, we pay attention to the misappropriation of women’s agency—all

women—by the state and to the social-legal-medical complex of patriarchally upheld norms and repetitions related to women’s, all women, bodies.

Our detours, then, return us to our point of origin, notably, the exceptionalization of Muslim women’s bodies and agency. A pedagogy of opacity not only de-exceptionalizes the other; it also compels students to rethink the intellectual and material implications of one’s locus of intervention. It creates a cognitive estrangement between the white researcher/student and the very intellectual “home” that has hitherto informed their modes of knowing the Other, to name the UK.

Érrance

It is easy to dismiss some of my detours as a case of a scholar gone rogue, whereby waffling and lecturing are collapsed. I maintain, though, that this seeming errantry is a wilful one. It is not without an aim. Its aim is precisely to detect the “perhaps” and “what ifs” that canonical historical books have glossed over. The productivity of errantry is best explained by Betsy Wing (in Glissant 1997:xvi) in the preface of her translation of Glissant’s work:

Directed by Relation, errantry follows neither an arrowlike trajectory nor one that is circular and repetitive, nor is it mere wandering-idle roaming. Wandering, one might become lost, but in errantry one knows at every moment where one is-at every moment in relation to the other.

In other words, the wanderer “spectates” whilst the errant “witnesses” and work toward a relational understanding of the other. In her seminal work, *A Pedagogy of Discomfort*, (Boler, 1999:184-187) distinguishes between “spectating” as the ability to “[allow] oneself to inhabit a position of distance and separation, to remain in the ‘anonymous’ spectating crowd and abdicate any possible responsibility” and “witnessing” as “a medium of perception in which we do not have the luxury of seeing a static truth or fixed certainty”. It is evident that spectating and witnessing are a matter of one’s privileged/oppressed situatedness and demand considerable self-re-evaluation work on the part of the student.

Paradoxically, “spectating” is rife in the anthropology of Islam, this very journal not barring, especially in articles concerned with the question of homosexuality. On a few occasions, the authors limit themselves to reporting data recollected from interviews and further methods and make little attempt to reflect on their positionality vis-à-vis their research, their interlocutors, their reader, and the subject of their study. Such a detached approach runs the risk of erasing the very existence of Muslim queers, in addition to leaving unattended urgent questions, such as the historicizing and contextualizing of the origins of the “homophobic” or “hyper-masculinist” logics that are seen to permeate Muslim spaces on an exceptional level. On this note, (Rahman, 2010:27) cautions us of the “difficulties of negotiating a social world where racism, Islamophobia, and homophobia intersect”. More recently and following her examination of the 2019 No Outsiders’ protest in Birmingham, whereby hundreds of parents from Birmingham’s Muslim communities mobilized against a newly proposed LGBT-inclusive school curriculum, Khan (2021:137) points us

to the racialized core of “the universalist myth of British homogeneity”. Following Khan, Muslim populations’ anxieties vis-à-vis the proposed curricula cannot and should not be approached irrespective of the consistent Islamophobia that permeates vernacular and official UK discourse. Khan (2021)’s work is a relational one because it explores the roots/routes and origins of the homophobia that has come to characterize Muslim communities in Britain without it being apologetic nor discriminatory. It does not fully assert that homophobia and Islam are irreconcilable. It also does not reduce queer Muslims to a singular category that is immediately knowable. Hers is an example of an opaque methodology that works toward connecting rather than divide.

Additional errant works where “witnessing” manifest in the classroom are those ethnographic accounts where the authors *think with* their subjects of research, as opposed to simply documenting them. On this note, I relate the words of Glissant (in Brittan 1997:23) who sarcastically remarked: “We hate ethnography [...] The distrust that we feel toward it is not caused by our displeasure at being looked at, but rather by our obscure resentment at not having our turn at seeing”. Among the ethnographies that students appreciate, I count young Iranian women playing “cat and mouse” with the authorities when acquiring condoms (Mahdavi, 2007), young Jordanian men weighing the cost of courting and dating in an economy rife with unemployment (Nasser El-Dine, 2018), and post-civil war Lebanese youth subverting sectarian politics (Moussawi, 2020). When juxtaposed with UK-based gendered moral panics, including the recent killing of Sarah Everhard and the 2023 Public Order bill that followed (Muriethi, 2023). My students find reciprocity between the UK and the Middle East states’ ability to infiltrate one’s most intimate space. Wandering between the Middle East and the UK, then, is not an aimless journey.

This exercise, nevertheless, is not immune to the pitfall of “cultural relativism” that Abu-Lughod (2002) cautions us against. To counter it, I deploy intersectionality in the classroom to its fullest. That is, I do not limit intersectionality to an identarian framework (we are all different by virtue of the axes of privilege and oppression that construct us; see Aouragh, 2019); rather, we explore and understand why such differences became defining structures in the first place. For example, when I ask my students what the difference between “honour killing” and “passion killing” is, they point to the non-premediated nature of the latter. There is safety in opting for a legal position, I argue. We are taught, after all, that justice is blind, and that obedience makes us “good citizens”. What my students do not invoke though is that in both contexts, masculinity perceives itself to be under threat, be it the jealous boyfriend or the “dishonoured” father. In both cases, a complex and historically informed perceived emasculation is at play. How the killing manifests is merely the product of localized displays of what Deniz Kandiyoti (2019) terms “masculinist restoration”, which materializes in moments of crises.

Still thinking intersectionally, we “charge” the Middle East state with sexual harassment (Amar, 2011; Hafez, 2014) whilst questioning UK liberals’ celebration of “add and stir” inclusive practices, such as the appointment (read “stir and add”) of a woman as head of police. We pay equal attention to racialization processes in western settings and Muslim-majority ones. We take Arab anti-black sentiments (Durani, 2021) seriously and we historicize the contemporary practice of Kafala by re/

tracing both its colonial and neo-colonial roots/routes (Al-Shehabi, 2021). In brief, we think about difference productively by connecting seemingly disparate and siloed narratives. By so doing, opacity emerges as part and parcel of knowing given its ability to preserve multiple epistemic coordinates whilst uncovering the limitations of Eurocentric frameworks that insist on transparency.

Conclusion

I attempted in my analysis above to counter Eurocentric assumptions about the “Muslim woman” without resorting to canonical paradigms and frameworks. Instead, I explored the uses of a pedagogy of opacity, inspired by postcolonial philosopher Edouard Glissant, in this regard.

Canons are eerily similar to contemporary puritanical logics, be it hermeneutics, discipline-related dos and don'ts, nationalist trends, in that each, sooner or later, operate on a loop that reinforces supposedly finite and indisputable truths. Opacity, on the other hand, is generative, and its advocates actively ask that they be de-authorized as ultimate knowers. In a hyper-connected world where nationalism and neoliberalism, identity and futurity/ies, and visuals and meanings are increasingly in tension and pressed by coloniality, one must seriously ponder the ever-hanging spectre of political apathy, or the consequences of refraining from asking difficult questions. Going beyond the canon in my exploration of the “Muslim woman” was one such difficult question to ask. That my exploration has failed to produce a firm definition of the “Muslim woman” is precisely the point I am trying to make.

My work risks antagonizing Orientalism critics given its re-centring of my students' white biases, to name the racist, orientalist, and Islamophobic undertones (they can also be explicit) of the interventions they sometimes make. I insist in this regard on the relational core of my pedagogy where centres, all centres, are constantly pushed to the margin and marginalized knowledges are prioritized. This movement from centre to margin, nevertheless, is not monodirectional or singular. It is constant and will remain so as long as our chaos-world is on the move. I understand my students' harmful interventions as clumsiness, and clumsiness as the natural result of having to navigate the muddy and slippery terrain of opaqueness, whilst reflecting on home's ugly truths, and appeasing the anxiousness that encounters with strangers, including the figure of the Muslim woman, induces. At the risk of sounding ‘motherly’, my classroom becomes the space where erring is sheltered from public backlashes, and where reflection, rather than reaction, take place relationally. To pretend that a relational analysis can attend to every nook and cranny in each given context is to reiterate the pitfall of Eurocentrism's will to know, where the mystical and the enchanted and the unknowable and the metaphysical serve as basis for “epistemicide” (de Sousa Santos, 2015).

We are all governed by an affective regime that controls and disciplines the relationships we wish to honour or wish we could honour. This affective regime has multiple implications. In the classroom, it presupposes a separation between flesh, the author's and the reader's, and text in the name of objective knowledge. Outside the classroom, it recreates securitized attachments, including the im/possibility of finding reciprocity in the designated “Muslim woman” other, under the threat

of “becoming-terrorist” (Abdel-Fattah, 2020). At the same time, I recognize my responsibility in absorbing the impact that such novel relations produce, given the high probability of paralysis and political disengagement that ensue from difficult conversations. Un-learning is not a finite endeavour and attending to it stretches well beyond the physical classroom (Mehta, 2019). It does not and cannot afford to take a break.

A pedagogy of opacity is a modality of learning where home, self, and early mis/information about the other are realigned and forcibly made to confront each other. This triadic realignment showcases the workings of home (the UK)—not of a geographically distant Islamic culture—in the manufacturing of the other. Home is recognized for the violence it produces. Students identify their very household, TV screens, local tabloids, and nation-wide moral panics as sites of casual and merciless reinforcement of stereotypes, sometimes with deadly consequences. The rediscovery of one’s very home, then, is a one-way return to one’s roots/routes. Paradoxically, opacity is its own silver lining. Through detouring and returning, new epistemic conundrums, albeit opaque ones and considerably more challenging to decipher, emerge. We must pay attention to the ways in which the alignment of certain spaces and times produces a knowledge that is taken as finite. We must remember that this alignment is as artificial as the seemingly natural order of the chaos-world. That beyond it lies a *tout-monde* (whole-world) that is yet to be.

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