

**Decentering a “Traditional” Classroom Through War-Talk and/or Trauma**

**By**

**Aisha Fofana Ibrahim, Ph.D**

**Department of Language Studies**

**Fourah Bay College**

**University of Sierra Leone**

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### **Decentering a “Traditional” Classroom Through War-Talk and/or Trauma**

It can be argued that feminist theory and criticism have been influential in opening up academic discourses to alternate and mixed modes of expressions and have been instrumental in the recognition and acceptance of the complexity, density, and importance of women’s lived lives expressed variedly. How such modes of analyses and expressions have been accepted and or resisted, however, remains a vexing question. For example, feminist theory and criticism are yet to be fully embraced and in some cases outrightly rejected at the University of Sierra Leone, where I teach. In terms of pedagogy, the banking/traditional method still predominates—I see instructors delivering lectures and dictating notes that they expect students to reproduce for tests and exams and can feel students’ confusion and frustrations when I try to make them partners in learning.

The rebel war which lasted for 11 years and ended 5 years ago in one way or another affected every Sierra Leonean and every aspect of life in the country. The university was not spared the carnage and the effects of the war are apparent in the problems that the university continues to face—shortage of books, teaching materials, lack of qualified staff, etc—basically no money to be innovative. It is in this challenging situation that I use what students have in common, the traumas of war, to introduce them to feminist and critical pedagogy with the aim of dislodging student’s worldviews, and belief systems. In essence, encourage students to become critical thinkers and to take knowledge from the classroom and put it into practice in real life.

For a long time, narratives of warfare—of conquest and revolution, of battles fought and treaties signed, of military and political tactics, of great leaders, and of heroes and enemies—were written mainly by men and from a male perspective. Women rarely

figured in these narratives, and if they did, it was mainly from a male perspective. More importantly, war narratives written by women often do not get the same leverage as those written by men mainly because women are seen as not participating in war or engaging in combat. For example Hemingway's collection of World War II stories, *Men Without Women*, which suggests the absence of women in war, was enthusiastically embraced by the literary community whereas Virginia Woolf met with a lot of resistance and disapproval when she wrote *Three Guineas*, a feminist critique of war. Furthermore, women's texts, like Doris Lessing's *Children of Violence*, that are clearly war-related are rarely labeled war novels and dismissed, not based on their lack of literary and aesthetic qualities, but more so because of the gender of the authors. Why is this? The answer is simple: war is masculinized and the narration of war stories has always been in men's domain. Also, men have always had time to write, had access to publishers, and as such the opportunity to present their own experiences whereas women are often denied or have limited access. Thus, whenever women have the opportunity to narrate their own war experiences, they use such opportunities to challenge dominant discourses of warfare.

Providing my students with the opportunity to challenge dominant discourses has been my primary concern and I have been able to do so through war-talk and exposing them to feminist and critical pedagogies. Through their narrations of traumatic war experiences I encourage them to critically think about their assumptions because I believe that including women's experiences or alternative knowledge about the war and other issues most result in a shift of perspective and lead to a better understanding of the ways in which systems of oppression intersect in academia.

Since one of my aims is to acknowledge and disrupt traditional power dynamics in the classroom, my students' reactions to discussing their experiences of war have been dependent on the spaces that I create for what Felman refers to as "resistance to knowledge" and Ronald Strickland calls "confrontational pedagogy." However, while I expect and encourage my students to act as witnesses to trauma, I do not make trauma the primary focus of the class. The aim is to encourage my students to act as witnesses to silence, oppression, and the relegation of women's experiences to the margins of war discourse and other spheres of life. As such, what I do is to expose my students to various feminist and critical theories, such as standpoint theory and global feminisms, and to design the class with these pedagogies in mind. As Alejandra Elenes points out, "critical and feminist pedagogy understand pedagogy as the construction of knowledge, not only its transmission" (206). Aware that the issues raised by these approaches have led to a heightened interest in and appreciation for people, events, and meanings long relegated to the margins of what is considered legitimate knowledge, I feel comfortable engaging these pedagogies in the classroom because I want to encourage my students to become conscious of the "hidden curriculum" of schooling, to help them problematize and critically examine the puzzling and contradictory aspects of their views of reality, and to help them construct powerful alternatives of their past experiences. I want them to understand that, "Teaching, is not the transmission of ready-made knowledge, it is rather the creation of a new *condition* of knowledge—the creation of an original learning-disposition." (Felman, "The Pedagogical Imperative 31).

For example in trying to sensitize students to the classroom dynamics that favor one group over another, I ask questions such as: why are the female students in this class

reluctant to answer questions? Why do they need to be encouraged to narrate their own experiences? Why do the male students always have so many questions about testimonies presented by their female colleagues and not vice versa? The response is often that female students are shy and that they question incredible stories of trauma because most women in Sierra Leone were protected from actual violence by male family members. This then becomes an opportunity for us to talk about issues of validity, justice, power, violation, trust, and trauma. In discussing issues of power and access, I often give the example of the study group, something most students are either a part of or familiar with. Study groups by college students were created out of necessity and as coping mechanisms to combat book and material shortages. Often, only a few students have access to text books and critical works and as such they form study groups where these materials are circulated. Additionally, some of these male students serve as surrogate tutors and help out their colleagues, the majority who are female. The female students in these groups end up assuming subordinate roles and rely heavily on their male colleagues for help in writing papers, accessing books, etc. they constantly have to negotiate different spaces in order to have access. Because of this power dynamics that is created, I notice that even when female students do not agree with their male colleagues in class, they find it very difficult to voice opposing views for fear of being dropped from the group and losing access to what they think they need to survive in college. I often try to link this situation to what happened during the war when men and women had to variedly negotiate the terrains of war in order to survive.

By encouraging students to talk about their war experiences, I am quite aware of producing what Shoshana Felman refers to as “the class in crisis.” But even though I do

understand that in engaging trauma as pedagogy such a “crisis” may be inevitable, I do not necessarily agree with Felman that “if teaching does not hit upon some sort of a crisis, if it does not encounter either the vulnerability or the explosiveness of a (explicit or implicit) critical and unpredictable dimension, it has perhaps *not truly taught*” (53). For me, the aim of introducing such traumatic testimonies in the classroom is not to make my students experience the trauma of the testifier, but to understand, at an ethical level, the testifier’s trauma and why some traumatic experiences are rarely the central focus in discourses of war. Moreover, in a university with at least two male students for each female student, I want my male students to understand, their privileged positions on campus, how they contribute to the oppression and marginalization of their female colleagues, why female students rarely have anything to say in class, and for them to understand the ways in which systems of oppression intersect in academia, among many other gender discriminatory practices. I agree with Julie Rak who posits in “Do Witness: Don’t: A Woman’s Word and Trauma as Pedagogy” that “it is not ethically responsible to try to push a class into crisis, to risk wounding students in order to teach them something about wounding. But it is also not enough to say that we can simply make the classroom a ‘safe safe space’ as a way to somehow contain the effects of narratives about trauma” (55).

Since my overall aim is to encourage critical thinking, I first introduce my students to standpoint and global feminisms. I make them understand that, “feminist standpoint theory is an epistemological theory that focuses on the ways that social location shapes knowledge” (Julia Woods 64) and explain that some of the key assumptions of feminist standpoint theory are that knowledge is always situated, a

product of a particular set of material relations, and produced from a range of different standpoints. Furthermore, I help my students to understand that the forms of knowledge produced from different material positions are not all equally valid and that some positions become the dominant ones. Thus in challenging the dominant role of men in the production and interpretation of knowledge, standpoint feminists are asserting that women's experiences or ways of knowing can no longer be marginalized, underrepresented, and undervalued. In essence when their female colleagues talk about their own experiences, they not only break their silences, but they also pose a threat to the master narrative and challenge its privileged position in the production of partial knowledge.

Because feminism is often viewed as suspect and a western imposition in my community, I help my students to understand the doctrines of global feminism and explain that women from the global north and south recognize and accept that women have diverse perspectives, issues, and priorities, but also agree on or recognize the fact that women's survival throughout the world should be at the core of feminism. That even though there may be certain political, economic and cultural differences among women, they still share the same concerns such as economic independence, labor equality, family, safe childbirth and support for childcare among many others. However, what is at the center of analysis is the issue of women's rights as human rights and that discourses of human rights remain central to the politics of postmodernity. Global feminism discourses most often work by arguing for a fundamental sameness in the face of difference. This theoretical approach, I believe, helps students to understand the underlying sameness of oppression. Thus when they share experiences of war and try to analyze the oppressive

tactics of the rebels, they are first able to identify as victims and then able to do a gendered analyses of the oppressive tactics used by the rebels. Additionally, they are also able to rethink initial statements made about some of the books we read in class. For example, before being introduced to feminist theory, students always asserted that Mariama Ba presents feminist women whereas Camara Laye presents traditional women in their works respectively. However, after spending sometime talking about what feminism entails they realize that such binaries are futile and begin to critically examine the political acts of the female characters in each novel.

Additionally, I introduce my students to Paulo Freire's "pedagogy of the oppressed," which has subsequently been modified by adherents and disciples such as Ira Shor and Henry Giroux as "critical pedagogy." This approach aims at developing critical consciousness in students. It is a student-centered dialogue that problematizes existing knowledge and focuses on problem posing. In the search for knowledge, students learn to question answers, ideologies, discourses, and theoretical frameworks in order to understand fully the subjective nature of these forms of knowledge. This is important for students to do because as Strickland observes, "traditional theories of pedagogy implicitly assume the existence of a substantial, fixed, and absolute body of knowledge which can be mastered by the student. But, when knowledge is conceived as an absolute category, teaching can only be indoctrination; there is no discursive space in which new knowledge can be produced" (292). Thus, my aim in using critical pedagogy is to open the minds of learners and enable them to engage in struggles reflecting their own interests through thinking critically and delving deeply into the structures and meanings of textual materials. For example, I often ask my students the question, what gives Tamsir, in



Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, the moral authority to say to Ramatoulaye: "You suit me as a wife."? Such a question often leads to a heated debate in which students are able to look at the novel from a religious, social, political, economic, etc perspective.

In *Critical Pedagogy, the State and Cultural Struggle*, Henry Giroux posits that critical pedagogy has a crucial role to play in the production of competing world and ideological views, in the construction of political and cultural practices that organize human experiences, and in enabling individuals to interpret social reality in liberating ways. It helps students avoid a "banking-pedagogy" in which they passively accept what is poured into their heads. This need to question rather than passively accept knowledge, which Ngugi Wa Thiongo' also advocates in *Decolonizing the Mind*, is important because as Gramsci has theorized about hegemony; cultural domination works by consent and is therefore difficult to identify and resist. Thus, students need to learn the skills through which they can identify and resist hegemonic discourses. This, I believe, I have been able to do through war-talk and through feminist and critical pedagogy, wherein I have encouraged students in the words of Berenice Fisher in *No Angels in the Classroom*, to, among other things, "identify assumptions, probe concepts, and analyze arguments" (7).

Teaching students who feel "safe" with the banking system of instruction is an uphill task but I believe that most of my students have been able to adjust to a new pedagogy because of the various methods employed in introducing them to a new way of learning and sharing knowledge. First I try to decenter the class by reorganizing our seating positions, allowing students to choose topics that they want to lead discussions on and to present in a manner that they feel comfortable doing. Thus we engage in a

democratic creation of knowledge and students get to understand that what they have to say does matter and that they should be responsible for their own learning.

Second, is the issue of authority and positionality. Most of my students are associate degree holders and may have taught for a number of years before returning to school. Interestingly, they may have taught some of their classmates in Junior high school and this tends to create some form of tension because hierarchy and how one is positioned in society does matter in my community. Trying to make students fresh out of high school believe that what they have to say count is often problematic. This becomes directly connected to the issue of coming to voice or the ability to speak for oneself and from one's own experiences. As students are encouraged to testify about their war and other experiences, they gradually become confident to voice their opinions as well as begin to question other positions, become aware of the interested or political nature of all interpretations, and an appreciation of other views especially those they do not agree with. Empowerment takes place at different levels. For some students in my class it's through being able to come to voice, for others it's the ability to question "truths" and realizing the political, social and economic stakes in any idea, theory or action.

In essence, encouraging my students to deal with the conflicts within and without their war and other experiences becomes an empowering experience. I agree with Susan Jarratt that teaching the conflicts does help students to recognize that "the inevitability of conflict is not grounds for despair but the starting point for creating a consciousness in students and teachers through which inequalities generating those conflicts can be acknowledged and transformed" (119).

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