

## CHAPTER THREE

### COUNTERING THE HEGEMONIC ENGLISH CURRICULUM: INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE THROUGH POETRY

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#### **A Reader's Discovery**

I discovered world literature at the age of 16. Despite always having been a bookworm, my literary diet up to then had been restricted to novels penned by American and British writers. My family travelled to England every summer on holiday and I remember badgering my parents for cash to spend on the stacks of second-hand books at the charity shops we passed by whilst visiting towns and villages in Devon and Cornwall. My parents could only afford to spare me one or two pounds but luckily the books were dirt-cheap and so I worked my way through writers as diverse and uniform as Enid Blyton, Jeffrey Archer, Mark Twain, Charles Dickens and many others. My literary sensibility was not sufficiently refined to allow me to discriminate between Archer and Dickens; all I was after was a good story.

Those writers kept me up till the early hours of the morning and I could not get enough of them. My parents were proud that I loved books so much but not being great readers themselves they failed to realise how our yearly jaunts to the West Country were limiting my exposure to the rest

of the world's literature. Just as the summer holiday always consisted of a fortnight spent in Devon and Cornwall, reading always consisted of British and American authors. In Malta, a former colony of the British Empire, my weekly trip to the village public library allowed me to stock up on more of the same, especially since the librarian took an interest in guiding my reading by making recommendations that did not venture far from her taste in Anglo-American literature.

At secondary school, studying English literature was compulsory. I remember enjoying the line-by-line analysis of *Macbeth* while half the class were given permission to go play soccer so as to avoid disrupting the lesson. At the age of 16, I enrolled in a postsecondary school and this time round the class was expected to study *Othello*, Philip Larkin's *The Whitsun Weddings*, Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*, Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, and Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. During literary criticism seminars, the teacher stuck to a limited range of poets from the Anglo-American tradition; we analysed their work in search of the holy grail of poetry, the hidden meaning behind every elliptical poem.

At 16, however, I also started working as a waiter, serving drinks every single weekend at a bar named after the 1966 Bob Montgomery song 'Misty Blue'. The money I earned allowed me to add dramatically to the library I had been building since the first book I received as a toddler. At a small bookshop in Valletta, I discovered the range of titles published by Wordsworth Classics. Even though many of these consisted of familiar names, I also stumbled upon Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Cervantes, and Rousseau. In a way, these translated authors enabled me to realise that literature was a much vaster galaxy of culture than I had previously imagined. The books were cheap and I took pleasure in seeing my library expand beyond what I could possibly read in a year let alone in between each one of my regular shopping sprees. The range of countries and cultures represented by the names on the book spines gradually increased; my own inner journeys as a reader became more varied and enriching.

I enjoyed collecting books but I still visited public libraries, in particular the national public library in Floriana. On its dust-covered shelves I discovered Naguib Mahfouz, Amos Oz, Osvaldo Soriano, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Gao Xingjian and so many others. The books I was able to purchase by waiting tables in combination with those I borrowed during my occasional visits to public libraries meant that I was reading more literature

in translation than literature originally written in English.

In the summer immediately before I enrolled on a Bachelor of Arts degree course in English, I had read a total of 52 books. I kept a reading log and marvelled at the diversity of cultures and voices represented by their authors. Once at university, I intentionally opted for study-units that would give me the possibility of studying world literature, but these were few and far between. I remember reading Patrick White and Thomas Keneally, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, and Ayi Kwei Armah.

### **A Dissatisfied Educator**

Once I became a teacher of English at the same postsecondary school where I had once been a student, I realised that most of the young people in my classes relied on the curriculum for contact with literature, not sharing the same passion for reading I had at their age. At the beginning of an academic year, I always discussed reading interests with them and most of my students reported that they were not really inclined to read anything else apart from what formed part of the curriculum. Together with my students' lack of interest in reading literature in general was the complete absence of enthusiasm for poetry. If their knowledge of English literature was severely limited, their knowledge of poetry written in or translated into English was almost non-existent.

What disillusioned me most as a teacher, however, was the fact that the reading list prescribed by the curriculum was almost exclusively comprised of the same body of Anglo-American literature I had been expected to read when I was my students' age. Due to Malta's colonial heritage, English is one of the country's two official languages. The majority of the population is deemed to be bilingual; most people value their ability to speak the global language fluently since this will allow them to participate in the world of commerce and industry. One of the effects of Malta's colonial history has been that the study of English in Maltese schools has for many decades emphasised the importance of a literary education that is for the most part centred on the Anglo-American literary tradition.

The curriculum I was expected to teach contained no acknowledgement of cultural diversity, no indication that English literature transcended the strictly white canonical writers who had been a staple part of the curriculum for decades after Malta's independence from the British Empire. The

curriculum was giving my students a very narrow perspective of English literature together with a complete lack of awareness of literature translated into English from a wide range of languages. My students were only studying texts that represented the hegemonic presence of Anglo-American literature in English curricula all over the world.

Ascribing my adult curiosity in exploring the world's diverse cultures to my broad reading experiences as an adolescent, I resolved to redress the curriculum's debilitating influence on my students. I did not have the power to change the set titles prescribed by the curriculum, however, for the purposes of my weekly literary criticism seminars I had the dispensation to choose whichever poems or prose passages I wanted to discuss with my students. I decided that it was best to start small and yet achieve something that was highly rewarding. For this reason I opted to vary as much as possible the range of poetry that my students came into contact with. I did so because I was aware that my students had practically no exposure to multicultural poetry and, hence, its potential to develop in them a higher intercultural competence remained unharnessed.

The poetry I encouraged them to read consisted of a medley of poems written in English as well as works translated into English from a variety of languages. Through my seminars students discovered such poets as John Agard, Pat Mora, Imtiaz Dharker, and Moniza Alvi, all of whom use English in order to explore the rich complexity of their cultural background. I also provided students with the opportunity of reading poetry in translation and in this case they discovered the works of Toeti Heraty, Pedro Serrano, Mohan Rana, and Caasha Lul Mohamud Yusuf. By critically engaging with poetry from different cultures, my students were able to shatter stereotypes and develop an appreciation of contemporary society's vibrant cultural variety. For example, Caasha's poem 'The Sea Migrations' managed to galvanise their empathy for the hundreds of Somali immigrants who cross the Mediterranean Sea each year hoping to start a new life in Malta and the rest of Europe. The critical reading of the poem allowed them to question their prejudices in relation to immigrants by paying heed to a voice that is usually stifled in Maltese society.

## Countering Hegemony

The classroom is one of the most sensitive sites where the hegemonic forces of globalisation find their manifestation. In fact, Spring goes so far as to identify Western societies as typical of a “globalised educational security state.”<sup>1</sup> According to Santos globalised localism is one of the ways through which globalisation is engendered. This is “the process by which a particular phenomenon is successfully globalised.”<sup>2</sup> He mentions the emergence of English as *lingua franca* as an example of this; however, the prevalence of Anglo-American literature in curricula aimed at foreign or second language learners of English could also be seen as typifying the process of globalised localism.

Despite the small-scale nature of their efforts, educators can play an important role in countering hegemonic practices. In fact, countering hegemony consists of “grassroots initiatives, community innovations and popular movements that try to counteract social exclusion, thus opening up spaces for democratic participation, for community building, and for alternatives to dominant forms of development and knowledge.”<sup>3</sup> Bailey maintains that, “education can certainly be dangerous and destructive but, by the same measure, can also be a generative and dialogic site for the cultivation of alternative knowledges and counter-hegemonic strategies.”<sup>4</sup> The simple act of varying the kind of poetry that my students read and discussed in class could be interpreted as a counter-hegemonic act since it enabled them to critically engage with voices that are usually silenced by the curriculum.

As I argue elsewhere, multicultural poetry is typically associated with ethnic minorities and other socioeconomically marginalized and under-represented groups.<sup>5</sup> Usually their literature is as sidelined in the curriculum as it is in the globalised world and this means that in an increasingly multicultural society students might find it difficult to engage with texts that are completely alien to the multicultural reality of which they are already an integral part. Like many other Western societies, Maltese society is becoming increasingly multicultural and in most classrooms the need to move away from an exclusive focus on the cultural manifestations of the dominant group is becoming ever more significant. The agents of change in this sense are educators such as myself.

### Agents of Change

In order not to risk colluding with the homogenising forces of globalisation, teachers need to embrace the responsibility of making careful reading choices and avoid perpetuating practices that manifest a complete disregard for multiculturalism. Dong posits that, "there is an urgent need for English teachers to increase their sensitivity to cultural differences and develop teaching skills to conduct classroom discussions that promote cross-cultural understanding and culturally varied ways of living and knowing."<sup>6</sup> Nault affirms that "English educators should adopt and promote a more cosmopolitan outlook that recognises and accepts other ways of life, modes of thought, and styles of English usage beyond Great Britain and the United States."<sup>7</sup>

Teachers need to "integrate world cultures into their materials and lessons to promote true linguistic/cultural awareness and international understanding among themselves and their students."<sup>8</sup> For this to happen, teachers require the sort of training that would not only equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills but also develop their beliefs and attitudes in relation to intercultural education. Oikonomidou argues that there is a need for "critical spaces in teacher education for the renegotiation of the local and the global and for sharpening prospective and in-service teachers' understanding of their professional roles."<sup>9</sup> Such training "could sensitise all educators to the multiple spaces that they occupy and could provide the meeting places for the development of informed responses to the pro- and counter-globalisation forces."<sup>10</sup> Lanas believes that

Intercultural education in teacher education is not simply a forum for teaching the skills needed to imagine new possibilities for social justice, but a forum where that imagination can occur, where both teacher educators and student teachers encounter multiple others, engage in difficult knowledge and explore the zone of discomfort to reimagine the world in which they live.<sup>11</sup>

My own teacher training certainly did not consist of such a forum. If it were not for my own appreciation of multicultural literature, I might never have sought ways of enabling my students to critically engage with it. Teacher education is fundamental as it ensures that the instruments of change in

the classroom can resist the hegemonic practices of globalisation by enabling their students to develop the necessary intercultural competence.

### Developing Intercultural Competence

Intercultural communication is the communicative exchange that occurs amongst people belonging to different social and cultural groups. The forces of globalisation affect individuals both directly and indirectly, and highlight the necessity for intercultural communication. According to Sorrells, "The context of globalisation is characterised by an increasingly dynamic, mobile world and an intensification of interaction and exchange among people, cultures, and cultural forms."<sup>12</sup> For this reason, developing young people's intercultural competence is fundamental. Intercultural education should not be seen as a trivial accessory but as a crucial component of every student's ability to function in a multicultural society. Coulby explains that "Interculturalism is a theme, probably the major theme, which needs to inform the teaching and learning of all subjects."<sup>13</sup> Portera agrees with this and claims that inter-cultural education "represents the most appropriate response to the challenges of globalisation and complexity. It offers a means to gain a complete and thorough understanding of the concepts of democracy and pluralism, as well as different customs, traditions, faiths and values."<sup>14</sup>

Such outcomes are only possible if there is "a commitment to communicative action which reaches towards the discourse of the other."<sup>15</sup> In demonstrating this kind of commitment in the English classroom, I was aiming to effect change in my students. Language learning within the paradigm of inter-cultural communicative competence possesses a transformative potential because "as learners explore their identities and come to understand their social situatedness, they will soon perceive the connections between themselves, their native cultural practices, alternative cultural practices, and the wider world."<sup>16</sup> Through the critical reading of multicultural poetry my students were able to augment their knowledge of cultural differences and similarities, question cultural stereotypes, and adopt the voice of the 'other'.

My classroom experience leads me to believe that by engaging students with multicultural poetry, teachers of English can help them become intercultural communicators. This is possible because "literature and the arts

contribute to the formation of a convivial culture, one that is tolerant and spontaneously at ease with its rich diversity.”<sup>17</sup> The fact that poetry can help develop intercultural competence is highly significant given that this is a crucial aspect of any twenty-first century student’s repertoire of communicative skills in a globalised world. For this reason, teachers need to demonstrate a willingness to contribute to the process of countering the hegemonic English curriculum.

### *Questions for Critical Reflection*

1. The author refers to his local public library as a rich source of literature, but what sort of case can be made for seeing the library he describes as a reflection also of cultural or literary hegemony?
2. Summarize how the author’s use of poetry in the classroom could serve as an effective tool to deconstruct dangerous or unfair stereotypes.
3. If the current forces of globalization are guarded and guided by Anglo-American economic interests, what benefits does the “globalised security state” reap from the status quo? What are the detriments?
4. Create a shortlist of author or poets whose names should also appear in the academic canon. Discuss and list their contributions to the cultural literature.
5. Why do the most vocal advocates of economic globalization appear to resist (or fear) multiculturalism or efforts to deepen intercultural communication?

### References

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- <sup>7</sup> D. Nault, "Going Global: Rethinking Culture Teaching in ELT Contexts," *Language, Culture and Curriculum* 19, no. 3 (2006): 324.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.
- <sup>9</sup> E. Oikonomidou, "Reinventing Aspects of Multicultural Education under the Shadow of Globalisation," *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 19, no. 3 (2011): 341.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup> M. Lanas, "Failing Intercultural Education? 'Thoughtfulness' in Intercultural Education for Student Teachers," *European Journal of Teacher Education* 37, no. 2 (2014): 173.
- <sup>12</sup> K. Sorrells, *Intercultural Communication: Globalisation and Social Justice* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2013), xiv.
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- <sup>16</sup> M. Pegrum, "Film, Culture and Identity: Critical Intercultural Literacies for the Language Classroom," *Language and Intercultural Communication* 8, no. 2 (2008): 145.
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