INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN A MULTICULTURAL WORLD

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Abstract: The events taking place at present in Europe and the whole Western world compel us to consider the issue of intercultural exchange more than ever before. The former culturally monolithic societies have doubtless given way to new fluid, heterogeneous, hybrid ones for whose proper functioning the intercultural competence proves absolutely indispensable. If, under the impact of globalization, there has been an unprecedented opening of frontiers for most of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it is now obvious that we are witnessing a reverse tendency. The previously open cultural spaces tend to close borders and, although the Berlin wall is down, many more invisible walls separate people and nations. Under the circumstances, it is of extreme importance to start educating people for a multicultural world characterized by cultures in conflict rather than cultures in contact. Intercultural competence requires deep knowledge of oneself, as well of the Other. The aim of this paper is to prove that contemporary fiction, by offering a multi-angled account of the contemporary society and a thorough description of the Other can be used effectively to educate for a multicultural world, as, unlike any other media, it shows complexity and makes diversity visible, doing away with stereotypes and prejudice, both detrimental to the communication between cultures.

Keywords: frontier, the Other, intercultural communication, multiculturalism, contemporary fiction

Internationalism at the beginning of the twentieth century, globalization for most of the same century and the fall of the Berlin Wall at its end apparently ushered in a new era of global cooperation and interconnectedness. The previously closed frontiers gave way under the pressure of mankind's heartfelt desire to live in an integrated and

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureş, ISBN: 978-606-8624-03-7

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integrative space. The former culturally monolithic societies sheltered within the well secured and defended borders of nation-states started commingling and cultural hybridization became the most obvious characteristic of the century to come. There was no doubt, at least after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the destruction of the Iron Curtain, that the world of the future would be a frontierless one.

The recent events humanity confronts with are clear evidence that the assumption had been correct. However, what had been initially sensed as a great chance of cultural integration is now felt as the predicament of the contemporary society. If, for more than a century, there has been an unprecedented opening of frontiers, it is now obvious that we are witnessing a reverse tendency. The open cultural spaces tend to close and the permeable frontiers are about to become impenetrable.

In 2002, Salmon Rushdie seemed to have a premonition that the post-frontier age would be one of fear rather than of freedom, sensing that "the post-Cold War world, suddenly formless and full of possibility, scared many of us stiff" (427). Moreover, he warned that "[f]or all their permeability, the borders snaking across the world have never been of greater importance" (Rushdie 425). What originally was an optimistic scenario for mankind's future proved to turn into a pessimistic, yet frighteningly real, one. Rushdie was at that time foreseeing, we are now witnessing it. "Here is the worst-case scenario of the frontier of the future: the Iron Curtain was designed to keep people in. Now we who live in the wealthiest and most desirable corners of the world are building walls to keep people out." (Rushdie 415)

The migrant has been recently hailed as "the archetypal figure of our age" (Rushdie 415), representing both the desire for and the substantiation of freedom. The migrant is a cultural traveller, "the man without frontiers" (Rushdie 415), whose presence has a twofold effect on contemporary societies, which can be, optimistically, looked at as a place of encounter or, in a more pessimistic perspective, as made up of very securely closed and defended cultural enclaves, or even worse, as potential battlefields. And this is mainly because individuals are too little prepared for the encounter for at least two reasons. The first is ignorance and fear of the Other. The second is incomplete knowledge of oneself and of one's own innate tendencies.

Once we accept that the migrant is a given of our age, we also have to understand that "the migrant, severed from his roots, often transplanted into a new language, always obliged to learn the ways of a new community, is forced to face the great questions of

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change and adaptation" (Rushdie 415) and that the cultural contact does not necessarily lead to adaptation and commingling. Consequently, "many migrants, faced with the sheer existential difficulty of making such changes, and also, often, with the sheer alienness and defensive hostility of the peoples amongst whom they find themselves, retreat from such questions behind the walls of the old culture they have brought along and left behind." (Rushdie 415)

The next step is to get an insight into ourselves, and eventually into human nature. The more we know ourselves, the more we know the Other, as most tendencies are generally human, having too little to do with difference of race, ethnicity, religion, age or social status.

One such dangerous attitude is ethnocentrism, that is considering yourself the norm according to which everyone else is judged, placing yourself in a position of superiority and seeing the culture you belong to as better than any other one.

Equally dangerous, and as detrimental to the communication with the other, is stereotyping. And seldom, if ever, do we realize that "[s]tereotypes are intrinsic to our constitution as cultural beings" (Dobrinescu 2014: 59). Stereotypes are the result of the individuals' search for a cultural tool to use in assessing and understanding the Other. They "act as a template, or as an ideal type, against which we can measure the unknown" (Holliday, Hyde, and Kullman 23). Being widely circulated in the society, especially by the media, stereotypes are much too often our single source of knowledge of the Other. "Stereotypes are usually simple, over-generalized assertions about what 'they' are like, 'they' being the members of social categories who are robbed of their individuality by having applied to them a set of beliefs that ascribe to them, one and all, a set of shared attributes of character and propensities of behaviour." (Snyder and Miene 34)

Ethnocentrism, stereotyping, and prejudice may, and generally do, lead to otherization, i.e. seeing the Other as different, but always inferior to the norm we represent.

A world that has been culturally reconfigured requires that individuals should have skills that could enable them to adapt and competently face the challenge of the cultural encounter. Among the key competences one needs in a multicultural context, Howard Gardner (254-5) identifies as necessary "[k]nowledge of and ability to interact civilly and productively with individuals from quite different cultural backgrounds – both within one's own society and across the planet," on the one hand, and "fostering of tolerance," on

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the other. Indispensable to the cultural exchange, both create the premise of a beneficial encounter between self and other. However, as they are not inborn, these competences should be educated and "[a]lthough education alone cannot change the face of many problems that exist today, it can influence the future by preparing the minds of […] people to include a diversity of viewpoints, behaviours and values" (Cushner 2). It is at this point that literature can prove its effectiveness.

Contemporary fiction, "transgressive" (Rushdie 440) by its ability to cope with the challenge of frontier opening, may be also seen as an efficient form of intercultural communication. Sprung from a multicultural context, contemporary fiction approaches the world's space as an inclusive one, focusing on "[t]he crossing of borders, of language, geography and culture; the examination of the permeable frontier between the universe of things and deeds and the universe of imagination; the lowering of the intolerable frontiers created by the world's many different kinds of thought policemen" (Rushdie 434). Its "new and complex creative energies" come from the search "in different contexts for new identities politically, culturally and socially" (Sauerberg viii).

By travelling across visible and invisible frontiers, contemporary British and American authors start investigating the complicated relationships between individuals within and outside societies. They foreground the other and make marginal voices audible in an attempt to provide a more accurate version of what had been previously taken to be only the sensational and the exotic. Their endeavour is thus directed towards showing the complexity of both individual and collective identities by questioning the stereotypical images more often than not created and circulated by the media, doing away with prejudice, preventing thus otherization.

Sensitive to the cultural changes affecting the contemporary society, fiction increasingly turns into a place of encounter and can thus serve the purpose of offering in-depth knowledge of both self and the other, the main prerequisite of an efficient intercultural communication act.

Used to the nineteenth and even early twentieth-century tradition of literature, whose main assumption was that whiteness represented the norm and that cultures were homogeneous entities protected by strictly guarded national borders, readers are now challenged to acknowledge diversity as a fact of life and be aware that cultural spaces are far from being unitary.

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Writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Sandra Cisneros, Percival Everett, or Hanif Kureishi, who share the condition of in-between cultures, use the opportunity of their writing to address the complex issue of identity in the contemporary context. By moving beyond stereotypical images and artistically showing the complexity of the Other, they create a place of encounter where different identities come into a mutually beneficial relationship.

Through contemporary fictional works created against the background of cultural hybridity and overall heterogeneity, readers cannot help realizing that "[f]or most of the time white people speak about nothing but white people, it's just that we couch it in terms of 'people' in general [and that] at the level of racial representation, whites are not of a certain race, they're just the human race" (Dyer in Holliday, Hyde, Kullman 105). Revealing in this respect are the onomastic strategies by which contemporary fiction writers make their readers receptive to the Other, and through a mirroring process, nuance their own knowledge of themselves. (Dobrinescu 2011) Moreover, by often adopting a first-person narrative mode, they allow us into the anxieties of all contemporary individuals forced to live in between.

Karim Amir, the protagonist of Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*, introduces himself with fine irony as an in-between cultures, the product of two old histories and yet unborn as an Englishman. He gives us a full account of the condition of the contemporary individual who is caught between here and there, willing, yet often little able, to develop a proper sense of belonging.

My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost. I am often considered to be a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories. But I don't care – Englishman I am (though not proud of it), from the South London suburbs and going somewhere. Perhaps it is the odd mixture of continents and blood, of here and there, of belonging and not, that makes me restless and easily bored. Or perhaps it was being brought up in the suburbs that did it. (Kureishi3)

Percival Everett's character, Thelonius Monk, is similarly ironic when he shows the pervasive presence and damaging effects stereotypes have in the contemporary society. He points out that what people generally expect to see is nothing but the norm they represent and what does not conform to it is just interpreted as an unhappy deviation from it.

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I have dark brown skin, curly hair, a broad nose, some of my ancestors were slaves and I have been detained by pasty white policemen in New Hampshire, Arizona and Georgia and so the society in which I live tells me I am black; that is my race. Though I am fairly athletic, I am no good at basketball. I listen to Mahler, Aretha Franklin, Charlie Parker and Ry Cooder on vinyl records and compact discs. I graduated *summa cum laude* from Harvard, hating every minute of it. I am good at math. I cannot dance. I did not grow up in any inner city or the rural south. (Everett 1)

Cultural divides are the result of labelling and have too little, if anything, to do with human nature. "Some people in the society in which I live, described as being black, tell me I am not *black* enough. Some people whom the society calls white tell me the same thing." (Everett 2)

The contemporary migrant expresses an acute desire to recover a sense of belonging and this is quite evident in the case of Sandra Cisneros' characters. Celaya Reyes and Esperanza are cultural travellers across national frontiers, but also across the invisible frontiers and walls that keep people apart.

By expressing her worry about people withdrawing behind walls of their own making, "[t]he boys and the girls live in separate worlds. The boys in their universe and we in ours" (Cisneros 1991: 8), Esperanza urges readers to reconsider the individual's position in the society and understand that "though we look at the same things, we see them differently" (Woolf 119).

Cisneros' characters are in search of a voice and a home of their own, and it is through fiction that they manage to bridge the precipice between here and there, inventing "a country I am homesick for, that doesn't exist anymore. That never existed. A country I invented. Like all emigrants caught between here and there" (Cisneros 2002: 434).

The country the wanderer between cultures is looking for is hardly identifiable in a world whose map has been drawn in an essentialist manner.

Through child Lilia, a latter-day version of Henry James' Maisie, Jhumpa Lahiri questions the old way of interpreting culture as homogeneous within the confines of the nation-state.

[My father] seemed concerned that Mr. Pirzada might take offense if I accidentally referred to him as an Indian, though I could not imagine Mr. Pirzada being offended by much of anything. "Mr. Pirzada is Bengali, but he is a Muslim," my father informed me.

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"Therefore he lives in East Pakistan, not India." […] "As you see, Lilia, it is a different country, a different colour," my father said. Pakistan was yellow, not orange. (Lahiri 27)

The child is taught the lesson of essentialism, that view of culture so widespread during the previous centuries and still lingering in the twenty-first. Apparently, it is difference that Lilia is advised to respond to. Actually, what the adult imposes on the child is a view of the world according to which nation-states are immiscible entities, separated by hardly permeable frontiers, inhabited by people whose cultural identities are at best ignored, if not totally obliterated.

Despite what she is being told, Lilia is more inclined to see what Mr. Pirzada and her parents have in common, rather than what keeps them apart. For her, self and other are in a mirroring process and difference does not imply divides, the presence of a wall between "us" and "them."

Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same. They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands. Like my parents, Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, chewed fennel seeds after meals as a digestive, drank no alcohol, for dessert dipped austere biscuits into successive cups of tea. (Lahiri 25)

The permeability of frontiers has brought cultures in contact and compelled all of us to acknowledge, even if not necessarily accept and value difference. The previously homogeneous societies become heterogeneous and culturally hybrid. At present, any single society is multicultural. "[C]ultural hybridity, mélange, metissage, mestizaje, the processes of blending and melding and change under whatever description, are facts of the world, facts of our condition, and they always have been." (Levy 7)

Becoming intercultural in a multicultural context requires deep knowledge of oneself, as well of the other. Contemporary fiction, by offering a multi-angled account of the contemporary society and a thorough description of the other can be used to educate intercultural competence. Literature, unlike any other media, shows complexity and makes diversity visible, doing away with stereotypes and prejudice, both detrimental to the communication between cultures. "Through increased awareness of difference in cultural encounters, [readers] may themselves acquire skills to adapt and perform more efficiently within, as well as across, cultural borders. By offering in-depth and multiple perspective knowledge of individuals and societies, literature could contribute to tolerance and better understanding." (Dobrinescu 2014: 127)

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