FEATURE

Translation and democracy in the post-Prevent English classroom

Rashi Rohatgi, rashi.rohatgi@nord.no

Nord University, Norway

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Nord University, Norway

Abstract

Teachers of literature have lately been asked explicitly to impart national pride. This agenda competes with multiple priorities, one of which is to engage minority students by exposing them to texts in which they can see themselves. Exposure, however, is just the beginning of what teachers can offer as we attempt to balance calls to impart national pride with current pedagogy and personal ideals. This paper uses a cosmopolitan but monocultural school – 99% South Asian Muslim – as a case study to assert that a multicultural education can work towards all of these aims.

Keywords: multicultural, literature, pedagogy, race, research-led teaching

Introduction

In 21st century England, teachers have been asked explicitly to impart national pride. For teachers of literature, this seems a natural fit, as nations are, after all, narrated phenomena (Bhabha 2013). However, the manner in which national pride has been defined in governmental guidance to teachers has raised challenges. Since its establishment in 2003, the UK government's Prevent strategy, calling upon teachers to work against students' radicalisation by promoting as it is officially phrased, "fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance" (Department for Education 2015), has been criticized. As English teacher and erstwhile head of the National Union of Teachers Baljeet Ghale pointed out in her 2007 speech as incoming NUT president, this equation of Britishness and citizenship sets foreigners, and those perceived as such, to be barbarians, asking "In what way, I'd like to know, are these values that are not held by people of other countries?... To demand that people conform to an imposed view of Britishness only fuels… racism" (Ghale 2007). In early 2019, the government agreed to an independent review of the strategy, but until its findings are issued, teachers continue to have a duty, under section 26 of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act, to carry it out.

Luckily for teachers of English, there is no shortage of literary texts that both engage with these values and meet the statutory curricular guidelines calling for the inclusion of Shakespeare and 19th- and 20th-century British literature. Luckier still for those teachers in agreement with Ghale, key stage 3 guidelines also call for the inclusion of a work of "seminal world literature" (Department for Education 2013). The Prevent agenda competes with multiple priorities in the teaching of both British and world literature, one of which is to engage minority students, in particular, by exposing them to texts in which they can see themselves. Exposure, however, is just the beginning of what English teachers can offer as we attempt to balance calls to bring forth national pride with current pedagogy and personal ideals. Students can be given the tools to consider seriously, also, their suspicions that they are not asking too much in wanting to be fully accepted into the society in which they live. The opportunity exists not only to impart national pride, but also to help students contextualize and voice their own interpretation of this pride.

Much of the writing on the teaching of world literature, or even literature written by or about minority ethnic populations, addresses teachers' potential discomfort with the new material. Dong, for examples, cites several other sources when she writes that 'Many English teachers, who come from middle-class European backgrounds and were trained in the white, male, and Eurocentric canon… often feel unprepared to teach multicultural literature' (2005). This paper is addressed most directly to teachers who have already decided to surmount this discomfort and are looking towards potential pitfalls not as reasons not to be more inclusive in their teaching, but as opportunities for reflection and improvement. Like many English teachers from a minority background, I came to the field of multicultural literature because of a gap I saw in my own (traditional, Eurocentric) education, and given the opportunity, I want to teach multicultural literature as integral to the curriculum.

Most basically, I want to do this in order to reach minority children who may not have enough exposure to other cultures to realize that their difference in appearance does not correspond to an inferior cultural heritage, as well as to reach children in the white majority who may reach similar conclusions about

minority children's heritage due to lack of exposure. However, students in a majority-minority school are often well aware of the value of their heritage, even institutionally: students at the school discussed here were able to take the Bengali GCSE, and they received a tailored, strong RE education not only in the basics of Islam, but also in the way Islamic faith and law can be constructed. Nonetheless, they are also well aware of the lack of value afforded to their heritage by society at large. Exposure, in this case, is not sufficient: the English lesson must lend itself to new understandings.

Hongyu Wang has written about research-led teaching from a minority woman teacher's perspective. She writes that:

> "In my own classroom practices, I refuse to claim my institutional authority (as teacher) to overrule students' biases. Although taking this stance can be problematic for a woman, especially one belonging to a cultural minority, I do not believe in the power of overcoming biases by external imposition. Transformation has to happen within the self, and external imposition, even with good intentions, cannot work well."

> …the issue, then, becomes how to transform mutual resistance into mutual challenge so that both teacher and student step out of their comfort zones into an uncertain, intersubjective space, a space vibrant with new possibilities...The consequences of such efforts are uncertain — we may never be sure that we are doing the ''right'' thing, yet it is within this ambiguity that our commitment to reducing violence is perpetually renewed." (2005)

Wang's position here is a complicated one, in practice, but as it is both logical and important, I attempted to follow her lead in the classroom. I found my greatest discomfort was, in fact, when discussing terrorism. It was very tempting to convince the students that my response to the Charlie Hebdo attacks and their aftermath was the right one, as students were listening, intently, to what I had to say to help them make sense of the issue. Before that discussion, they had been resistant to listening to one another in class about the importance of the author's use of language, so I wasn't confident that they would be willing to listen to one another's thoughts on actual violence, but it turns out that this was the subject that got them to listen to one another for all of the classes to follow: they needed to hear an array of responses out loud, alongside my analysis, rather than clustered behind it.

The discussion coloured the rest of the class, as it was intentionally related to the Bengali poem that followed by the theme of 'fear'; it even perhaps made them more open to feeling a connection to Bengali literary culture distinct from their ability to speak the language and from the pairing of the language with Islam in their daily lives. Texts themselves are not more or less valuable to students but become more or less valuable when presented as such by teachers. Sitting in on Bengali classes, I soon learned that although students study the language, they do not study the literature. I decided to bring in a poem from my ancestral hometown of Patna. This poem, 'Dotana,' ('Dilemma'), was written by Malay Roy Choudary, a member of the Hungry Generation poets; these poets read and were read by their Anglophone literary equivalents, the contemporaneous Beat poets. The poem tells of a speaker walking

home through his estate and getting jumped, describing his fear and his decision to flash a knife, but also to choose not to use it.

I read the English translation, and one of my quieter students, Aarif, excitedly volunteered to translate it back into Bengali for the class. We discussed why the translator had left the word *chawl* in Bengali, and what the difference was between a *chawl* and an estate, and how using the Bengali maintained a certain rhythm as well as made sure that the imagery of the setting was still specific in a poem about a universal experience. We looked at some of the imagery, and students thought through the idea of translation by deciding how they would translate the poem into pictures (and then drawing it): Aarif, for example, wanted to storyboard it because he felt the narrative was the most important part, while Afsana emphasized the atmosphere by focusing on the imagery of claustrophobia. Ishaq domesticated it by replacing the religious imagery with competing brand imagery on the characters' trainers. Already the students' engagement level was noticeably higher than it had previously been.

The next class, we did not immediately dive back into the poem, but instead talked more generally about the concept of fear. "Since I moved to Britain, I've heard the expression 'stiff upper lip,'" I told the students. "Is that how you'd deal with fear? What would you do if you were walking down the hall, and a snake appeared?" Banaz kicked us off by saying she would cut it down, but jolly, kind Adnaan countered that he would instead try to charm it. The sole non-Asian, non-Muslim student interjected and said she would take it home and make it her boyfriend, and as the rest of the classed looked shocked, I hastily moved the discussion forward. "What if we are talking about a real person, one who actually insults you?" "Like a terrorist," Muzammil supplied. Zohra, who in a previous class had tried to explain to the others that 'crestfallen' was a good word for a poem because you could then see the person slouching, their head hung, said, "They are probably terrorists because they are terrorized." This time, the others listened to her, and they kept talking.

When it came time for them to write their own poems about a time when they were afraid (guidelines: you can't use the word 'fear' or describe your face, and it doesn't have to be about a real thing that happened to you, just a real feeling), Ishaq, in his characteristically macho, clued-into-pop-culture way, decided he wasn't going to write about himself at all, because he'd 'never been scared,' but rather about Jeff, a (white) character from a popular vine. Ishaq's poem at the end of class surprised me: he'd taken to heart something I'd said to a neighbouring table full of girls off-handedly, "Remember, in Bengali the plural is masculine, but that doesn't mean all the menacing people were necessarily male, just some of them: girls can be frightening, too." He'd written a poem about a woman falsely accused of murdering Jeff in the voice of the woman! As a woman of colour, I've been personally frustrated so many times when white women or men of colour don't acknowledge intersectionality, and Ishaq specifically loved gangsta rap with misogynistic overtones (when I had explained iambic pentameter in the previous unit he had immediately gotten it, reciting the sonnet at hand with hands billowing "like A$AP Rocky", who has a song called 'Hella Hoes'), so it was important for me to focus my feedback to him on that aspect with genuine praise.

The students' responses to the inclusion of research-led, multicultural-focused teaching was indeed an illustration of incremental increase of the so-called "British value" of mutual tolerance and respect (in an age-appropriate fashion) – but it was also an example of students understanding, and feeling empowered by the realization, that literature offers them a context in which they can voice their personal set of answers to the question, 'What am I doing here? In this gendered body? In this racist country?' In 2015, Nicky Morgan, then Education Secretary, revisited the culture wars that brought anxiety to teachers in Muslim-dominant British neighbourhoods, reaffirming her position: "Every school should be promoting fundamental British values, not just because they act as a bulwark against extremism, but because it is the right thing to do" (Morgan 2015, no page numbers). Whether or not one agrees with the school as a place for the propagation of a certain set of values, the importance of the values she reaffirms - "democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs" (2015) - can certainly be explored in the English classroom, and not only through the study of English texts by English authors.

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