Identity and Education

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ABSTRACT: Identity and education are intrinsically connected. While education is supposed to equip students to define who they are, sometimes, however, when education becomes a vehicle of the dominant, its goal is most importantly to pigeonhole the other in a position of inferiority whereby, it is impossible to escape this place of the colonizer. But then only education can take any one from the position of victimization to a position of empowerment when the other reaches a high-standard of knowledge and discernment.

Introduction

One of education’s main goals is ultimately to give students the tools necessary to think critically and independently, so that they would be able to formulate a sense of who they are. However, in some cases the education system has failed in this role and responsibility. This paper will attempt to illustrate this point by discussing the failure of educators in Morocco and Alberta to truly deliver the tools of critical thinking and independent synthesis. Even in the best of circumstances, many youths struggle to define themselves, especially in a fast changing, media and technology saturated world. The question of identity, then, becomes even more problematic and pressing for any minority in a white majority culture. Similarly, children who received their education in schools in North Africa, for example, have difficulties sorting out the question of identity because of French colonialism, the different ethnicities, languages, and the kind of education they received. Even though Morocco gained its independence over half a century ago in 1956, most of the school curriculum content still reflects the dependency this former colony still has on France. This paper will examine the effects of education in contributing to the confusion and in shaping the identity of students both in Morocco and Northern Alberta.

Born and raised in Morocco, I am able to testify to the merits and shortcomings of the Moroccan school system. Having attended and achieved three degrees in two reputable Canadian universities: McGill and the University of Alberta, I am able to look back on my own experience as a student in Morocco and examine it critically and fondly. Having spent almost two decades as an English instructor in Northern Alberta teaching numerous Aboriginal students, I can draw some parallels between these two geographically distant places, Morocco and Northern Alberta. Both places clearly substantiate how both the French and English colonizers subsume the original inhabitants, their culture, traditions, and languages; however, in both cases education remains the only way out of the denigration, alienation, and
self-estrangement colonialism has inflicted on the collective consciousness of Moroccan and Aboriginal peoples. Consequently, education can be counterproductive if the curriculum and content are distorted and biased by colonial vestige; nevertheless, knowledge remains the only way to deciphering the complexity of challenging issues such as, reconciliation, healing, and clear, strong sense of the self.

Over the ages, Europeans managed to take away not just the physical and material wealth of the countries they colonized but also created what Edward Said (1978) referred to as Orientalism in the case of the Arab/ Muslim world: an image out of history that shape “an ideal other” who remains unchangeable and who is in no position to correct or reformulate that image that has been created for her/him over the centuries. Similarly, Mark C. Anderson and Carmen L. Robertson review the content of the Canadian press and contend that: “An examination of press content in Canada since the sale of Rupert’s Land in 1869 through to 2009 illustrate that, with respect to Aboriginal peoples, the colonial imaginary has thrived, even dominated, and continues to do so in main stream English-language newspapers” (Seeing Red: A History of Natives in Canadian Newspapers, 2011, p. 3). Anderson and Robertson establish the strong and ongoing collaboration of the Canadian newspapers not only in reinforcing the widely-established stereotypes but also in keeping the spirit of imperialism alive in Canadian culture and in the collective imagination. Anderson and Robertson provide two concrete historical facts which illustrate this implicit collaboration between the media and the Canadian government.

The first fact is the treaty system that: “effectively stripped Aboriginals of the vast majority of their lands at the end of a gun barrel or with the implied threat of violence” (Anderson & Robertson, p. 4). The media collaborates with the Canadian government by not reporting effectively and objectively the events as they, in fact, occurred. Instead, the press juxtaposed the seemingly peaceful Canadian way to the American brutal killing of Aboriginals in the United States and the blatant usurping of their lands. When, in fact, as Anderson and Robertson confirm: “Again and again in the 1870s the press made it clear that Canada chose not to engage in all-out war because it was simply too expensive and not because it was somehow unwarranted” (Anderson & Robertson, p. 4).

The press also reinforces what David Spurr refers to as “the colonizer speaks as inheritor” (The Rhetoric of Empire, Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration, 1993, p. 28). Likewise, Paul Nesbitt-Larking confirms that “the medium of print is strongly associated with the politics of imperialism and colonialism.” (Politics, Society, and the Media, Canadian Perspectives, 2001, p. 52). Moreover, the treaties ‘ultimate objective was to appropriate the lands, and they “all derived, ultimately, from the fact of white invasion, which was inherently aggressive” (Anderson & Robertson, p. 4).

Secondly, the residential school system’s ultimate goal between 1879 and 1996 was not merely to teach Aboriginal children reading, writing and Arithmetic, but most importantly it “sought to disappear Aboriginal culture by vigorously educating it out of existence” (Anderson & Robertson, p. 4). Likewise, John Milloy affirms that: “In their attack on language and spirituality, the schools had been a particularly virulent strain of that imperial epidemic sapping the children’s bodies and beings” (A National Crime: The Canadian Government and The Residential School System, 1999, p. 5). Far from providing tools for the students to develop a clear sense of identity, the residential school system creates a generation of
people who are lost to their culture and heritage; in fact, the legacy of the Residential schools and their destructive impacts continue to have far-reaching implications on every aspect of Aboriginals and their progeny.

Similarly, in Morocco, the Berbers\textsuperscript{1} as they were referred to by the Romans or “Imazighen” as they prefer to be called are the indigenous people of North Africa. Over the ages, they lived through and survived the invasions of many colonizers. “Despite Roman colonization of the area and an invasion by the Arabs in the seventh century AD, rural Berber tribes remained relatively autonomous until the twelfth century, when invading Bedouin Arabs wrecked the Berbers’ peasant economy and converted many of the settled tribes to nomads” (\textit{The New Encyclopedia Britannica, 2005}).

Like Aboriginals everywhere, most Berbers have an oral tradition and although Tamazight and other Berber languages have their syllabic, most Berbers did not write nor read their own languages; they have spoken varieties of Maghreb languages. Consequently, the school system in Morocco continues to pose a substantial crisis of identity to most children, especially the Berber/Imazighen. As a case study, my siblings and my school journey in Morocco can easily illustrate the strengths, shortcomings and complexity of the education system in relation to culture and identity. Raised by a mother, who had never been to school, and who spoke mostly Berber at home and a broken Moroccan dialect outside, my siblings and I realized early in our childhood that we were different than other children whose mothers spoke the conventional Moroccan dialect, a mixture of Arabic, Berber, French, and Spanish. In grades one and two, the medium of education was conducted completely in a third language: classical Arabic. We learned the written and spoken Arabic alphabets and religious studies.

In grade three, half the day was allotted to Arabic, and the other half was exclusively to French. We started learning the French alphabets, spoken and written French; we also learned the fundamentals of math in French. From grade three to grade 12, we moved easily between the two languages. For example, in grade six, history, geography, and science were all taught in Arabic. However, in grade seven, history, geography and science were not only taught in French, but also by French teachers. Similarly, philosophy, in grade 12, was taught either in French or Arabic depending on the availability of instructors. To add more confusion to an already demanding situation, in grade 10, we started English for the first time.

Nevertheless, if education is meant to help the comprehension of the intricacies of the culture and traditions to the pupils, and if school is supposed to provide us with the best examples of how we should live a good life, Moroccan children rarely read about anyone in French they can easily identify with. Most of the characters in the literature were white people who lead lives we did not know anything about. For example, Monsieur and Madame Dubois\textsuperscript{'} (\textit{Bien Lire et Comprendre, 1961}) nuclear family was something of an anomaly because such a family did not exist where I was growing up. They have only two children: one boy and one girl. Each child had his/her bedroom. Whereas, in my childhood, most

\textsuperscript{1} As stated in \textit{The New Encyclopedia Britannica}, “the term Berber is derived from the Roman term for Barbarians” (117). The history of colonization and its implication on Aboriginal peoples of North Africa and their cultures dates back to the Romans and their attempt to colonize North Africa many centuries ago. Though they managed to colonize some pockets, they were never able to colonize the whole region.
families have a large number of children; all mothers were stay-home women who, like my mother, had never been to school. The families were patriarchal, and everyone knows exactly what role each person has to play. The father goes to work and the mother stays home and makes a home for her children, whereas in the French literature we took, Mr. and Mme. Du Bois had a different existence. Both work outside the home, and both were able to drive a car. Madame Du Bois challenged her husband, especially when it came to the house’s finances, whereas in Moroccan society at that time, everyone in the household had to abide by the father’s rules; he was the sole breadwinner.

For an impressionable child, this vying and different existences lead to an inner turmoil. I remembered, as a child, my inner struggle trying to reconcile my diametrically opposing verities. Most importantly, I resented my own parents because, to my own naïve sense of reality, they were not as sophisticated as Monsieur and Madame Du Blois. Most importantly, there was no way to admit to it, nor was there any one to discuss this notion with openness. One of the fundamentals of Islamic philosophy is for children to obey and respect their parents.

Thus, colonialism’s “raison d’être” is not only to preclude Native people from understanding and knowing their own heritage, customs and language but also as Albert Memmi underlines that: “The distance which colonization places between him and the colonized must be accounted for and, to justify himself, he increases this distance still further by placing the two figures irretrievably in opposition; his glorious position and the despicable one of the colonized” (the Colonizer and the Colonized, 1957, p. 54-55). Moreover, the colonizer fosters the difference and enhances it to keep his position of power. As Emma LaRocque attests that colonialism’s white hegemony keeps Natives feeling inferior by misrepresenting them; she writes: “As Canadian Natives and non-Native peoples, we find ourselves, our respective culture, lives, and experiences, constructed and divided as diametrically opposite to each other.”(When The Other is Me: Native Resistance Discourse: 1850 – 1990, p.4). She then goes on to say “The ‘Indian’ as an invention serving colonial purposes is perhaps one of the most distorted and dehumanized figures in White North American history, literature, and popular culture” (When the Other is Me, 2010, p. 4).

Like Aboriginal children in northern Alberta who did not have a written language, Berber children in Morocco had to learn the medium of the colonizers: first Arabic, then French. Then only difference is that Berbers and Arabs have similar physical traits. Moreover, most Berber people in Morocco practice Islam. However, as The Oxford Encyclopedia of World History, 1998, p. 72) succinctly states: “Their [Berbers’] extreme independence and austerity were exemplified by the Donatist circumcelliones (violent bands of marauders) of the fourth and fifth centuries, by the Kharijite sect of early Islam, and by the cults of marabouts’, Islamic holy men of ascetic devotion and organizers of fraternities. . . . In this way they both resisted the ARAB conquest and transformed Islam to suit their own states”. Despite their strong sense of independence, North African Natives lost much to the various colonizers. Of course, there is no palpable hostility between the two ethnicities in Morocco. However, any system of colonization has a lasting impact. “The relationship between Occident [in this case Arab] and Orient,” As Said affirms, “is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony”(Orientalism, 1978, p. 5). The French are no longer physically present in North Africa, but their explicit and implicit impact is everlasting. The Moroccan psyche still uses the French as yardsticks in their emancipation and sophistication.
Therefore, the only way for Aboriginal peoples all over the world to combat this polemic is to master the language and the literatures of the colonizers. They must strive for more knowledge not only to understand others but ultimately to define themselves. Most importantly, for both Aboriginal and Moroccan students, though, Chinua Achebe’s pronouncement seems to be a pertinent solution. He proclaimed on the CBC, *Writers and Company*, 1994 that: “As Africans [Or indeed North American Aboriginals], we need to restore what was lost. We need to redefine ourselves”. It is our obligation to go as high as possible in the academic school system, revise our curriculum, work diligently within the established structure to raise awareness in the public at large, to rewrite our own stories. We have to learn and understand many languages and comprehend the cultures they emanate from. As Said concludes:

We need to concentrate on the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other, and live together in far more interesting ways than any abridged or inauthentic mode of understanding can allow. But for that kind of wider perception we need time and patient and skeptical inquiry, supported by faith in communities of interpretation that are difficult to sustain in a world demanding instant action and reaction (*Orientalism*, 1978, p. XXIX).

Only then can we understand who we are in the world and how we are in relation to each other. We need to emerge from the victim mentality that the colonizer has inculcated in us. We should use tools, like multiple languages, scholarship, and research to deepen our knowledge and understanding not only to get to know others but also to define ourselves the way we wish to be defined. There are countless benefits to being exposed to other languages, literatures, and cultures. We become more aware of who we are not only to ourselves but in relation to others. The more knowledge we accumulate, the easier it becomes for us to discern and choose the appropriate place in our world. However, the sense of community cannot be achieved unless the white majority are also willing to dismantle their preconceived ideas about the other who is usually either Native or coloured and start to get to know the other for who h/she really is with his/ her complexity. As Edward Said (1978) succinctly phrase it:

There is, after all, a profound difference between the will to understand for purposes of coexistence and humanistic enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate for the purposes of control and external enlargement of Horizons, and the will to dominate for the purposes of control and external dominion (Said, 1978).

Nowadays, most Native peoples have started to become more aware of their situation and the way they have been mistreated over the years. There are many grassroots movements who protest the status quo and demand more rights, and freedom. Harmonious coexistence will be achieved only if the Native and White people implement what Dalai Lama proposes that: “there is genuine potential for mutual understanding. . . . While preserving faith towards one’s own tradition, one can respect, admire, and appreciate other traditions” (“Many Faiths, One Truth” *The New York Times*, May 24, 2010).

To achieve this vision of cohesiveness and coexistence, both Aboriginals and whites need to get to know the other personally, culturally and socially. However, in my experience in Northern Alberta, many Aboriginal people are still physically and psychologically shackled by colonialism and its injustices, and many whites still hold many racist notions. They are unable to dismantle the negative
views about the other, while Aboriginals are unable to break the shackles and move away from the pigeon hole Residential schools had successfully left them. A number of palpable steps have been taken to bridge the gap between the Natives and white people. For example, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission\textsuperscript{2} hearings are a valuable start in the right direction. White people must know what had happened to Natives while Aboriginals must tell their stories in their own words. However, the South African model\textsuperscript{3} sole purpose is for coloured South African to tell their stories. The objective of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission is for the coloured South Africans to face their victimizers, who during Apartheid era dehumanized and tortured them and killed their loved ones in front of their eyes; the South African process’ aim was ultimately to get to the bottom of the truth of what had happened with the objective to reconcile, forgive and move on. In Canada, however, neither truth, nor reconciliation will ever be achieved as long as monetary transactions are at the center of these emotional and complex questions. Only introspection and self-realization will eventually liberate Aboriginal peoples from the injustices of the past and help them to forge a new kind of existence that will keep the focus on industry and determination to have a better life in one of the most sought out countries in the world.

Similarly, Whites in Northern Alberta need to get away from their preconceived notions about Aboriginals and get to know them individually for who they are. They need to learn more about Residential schools and their lasting impacts on Aboriginals. Both should work hard to reach what Edward Said (1978) advocates that people should “interpret texts philologically, concretely, sensitively and intuitively, using eruditions and an excellent command of several languages to support” to understand each other. Ultimately, education is the only key to face these complex, identity issues.

\textsuperscript{2} A Truth and Reconciliation Commission is a commission responsible for revealing and unpacking the past human wrongdoing a government committed against a group of its citizens in the hope that the truth is revealed. South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established by President Nelson Mandela, and chaired by Desmond Tutu is the best model in our recent history.

\textsuperscript{3} In South Africa, the purpose of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is to get to the truth so that the victims’ stories were heard by the white aggressors during Apartheid.
References


