

Teaching for Liberty: Reading for Dissent

Enseñanza para la Libertad: Lectura para la disidencia

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Abstract

In our digitalized and globalized world dissent and otherness are in jeopardy. Commodification nullifies them by stripping them of their complexity. For one thing, today's consumerism is no longer about enforcing order, but about destroying it. Dissent is integrated, marketed and thus, neutralized. For another, when cultures are commodified, they are simplified. One part is accepted whereas the other is dismissed. As a result, cultural stereotypes are brought about. Literature confronts commodification by offering dissent and otherness in their full complexity. This feature makes it fundamental for the survival of democracy, which implies acceptance and respect for the plurality of views. Unfortunately, some scholars like William Marx and Antoine Campagnon agree that in the Western world literature is dying. Indifference is killing it. Under these circumstances teaching plays a crucial role. A multicultural and critical pedagogy is fundamental for the survival of democracy. And literature is a wonderful tool to achieve this goal. However, teachers should go beyond the conception of literature as a self-sufficient object without any relevant connection with the surrounding world. Only then will educators be able to lay the foundations of the republic of imagination Azar Nafisi talks about.

Keywords: dissent, otherness, commodification, literature, teaching

Resumen

En nuestro mundo digitalizado y globalizado el disenso y la otredad corren peligro. Su commodificación, es decir, su transformación en productos de mercado ha ido despojando a ambos conceptos de su interesante complejidad. Por un lado, el consumismo actual no intenta imponer un orden sino que trata de destruirlo. En este sentido, el disenso no es de temer. El mercado lo integra, lo pone a la venta y de esta manera, lo neutraliza. Por otro lado, cuando las distintas culturas son transformadas en mercancías, terminan simplificadas. Una parte de ellas, la que resulta funcional al mercado, es aceptada, mientras que la otra es descartada. En esta forma, se generan muchos de los estereotipos culturales de la actualidad. La literatura, por su parte, le hace frente, a la commodificación en tanto le brinda un espacio al disenso y a la otredad. Esta característica la hace fundamental a la hora de garantizar la supervivencia de la democracia, la cual implica la aceptación y respeto por la pluralidad de puntos de vista. Desafortunadamente, algunos académicos como los franceses William Marx y Antoine Campagnon concuerdan en pensar que en occidente la literatura está moribunda. La indiferencia la está aniquilando. En estas tristes circunstancias la docencia tiene un rol clave que jugar. Una pedagogía crítica y multicultural es fundamental para la supervivencia de la democracia, y la literatura es una herramienta inigualable para lograr este fin. Sin embargo, los docentes debemos ir más allá de la concepción de la literatura como un objeto autosuficiente sin ninguna conexión con el mundo que la rodea. Solo así los educadores podremos sentar los cimientos de la república de la imaginación de la que habla Azar Nafisi.

Palabras claves: disenso, otredad, commodificación, literatura, docencia

Introduction

Marshall McLuhan, a true visionary, predicted the global village more than five decades ago. Back then it was certainly not easy to picture a world highly interconnected by the media, the internet and commerce. Nowadays it is our everyday reality. If we want to, we can watch news coming from Syria. If we choose to, we can buy goods coming from Indonesia at a grocer's shop. Time and again we can try Thai food at a local restaurant. Within hours we can land anywhere. Through Facebook we can contact friends in Russia.

Furthermore, big cities around the world have a lot in common: traffic jams, motorways, pollution, shopping centres, banks, airports. People around the world also share a lot. On a daily basis they watch TV, they surf the net, they wear jeans, T-shirts and trainers, they use mobile phones. There is even a common means of communication for speakers of different languages: English, the modern lingua franca. Moreover, the concept of national identity is beginning to crumble down. This is, in fact, the point of Taiye Selasi's Ted talk "Don't ask me where I'm from. Ask me where I'm a local". This sort of statement makes a lot of sense for someone who is of Ghanaian and Nigerian descent, was born in London, raised in Boston and lives in Rome and Berlin. Borders are disappearing and the world is becoming one, as John Lennon imagined.

However, Byung-Chul Han (2018) says: "...the abolition of distance does not create more closeness, but rather destroys it" (p.5). According to the Korean-German philosopher, in the digital era everything is equally near and equally far simply because we are under the rule of the Same. Everything is levelled out into a hell of sameness: the same brands everywhere, the same news everywhere, the same social networking sites everywhere, the same banks everywhere, the same clothes everywhere, the same fast food chains everywhere. The shopping centre is definitely the epitome of this nightmare.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the fundamental role literature plays for the survival of democracy in a world of sameness. With a view to discussing this statement this analysis will touch on what Byung-Chul Han calls the expulsion of the Other and its consequences. It will also take a close look at the main functions of literature in our

digitalized and globalized world. Finally, it will address the task of literature teachers in this connection.

The expulsion of the O/other

The concept of the Other is rooted in the work of Jacques Lacan. The Other –with the capital 'O'– is the big Other (l'Autre) (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2007). Lacan seems to have borrowed the term from Hegel, to whose work he was introduced by A. Kojève. The Other can be equated with language and the law and hence it is the symbolic order (Evans, 2007). And although it is not a real interlocutor, it can be embodied by other subjects such as the mother or father. Fundamentally, the Other is essential for the subject because the subject exists in its gaze. In fact, the first desire of the subject is the desire to exist in the gaze of the Other (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2007).

The term has also been extensively used by literary critics in the field of postcolonial studies. From this perspective, the Other can be compared to the imperial centre, which provided the colonized subject with a sense of his or her identity as dependent. It delivered an ideological framework in which the ideological subject might come to understand the world (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2007). The adoption of the ideals of the Other not only implies clear references but also dominance and subjection.

Othering is a concept coined by Gayatri Spivak to describe the various ways in which imperial discourse creates its 'others'. This is a dialectical process "...because the colonizing Other is established at the same time as its colonized others are produced as subjects" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2007, p.156). Although Spivak makes a distinction between 'Other' and 'other', many critics use the spellings interchangeably. In either case, the construction of the O/other is crucial for the construction of the Self. In different kinds of colonial narratives the Self is constructed as orderly, rational, masculine and good while the 'other' is constructed as chaotic, irrational, feminine and evil (Al-Saidi, 2014).

In 2016 the German-Korean philosopher, Byung-Chul Han published a book called *The Expulsion of the Other*. In this text he points out:

The time in which there was such a thing as the Other is over. The Other as a secret, the Other as a temptation,

the Other as eros, the Other as desire, the Other as hell and the Other as pain disappear. The negativity of the Other now gives way to the positivity of the Same (Byung-Chul Han, 2018, p.1).

In the era of hyperconsumerism, Byung-Chul Han seems to question the binary opposition between the Self and the O/other. Along the same lines the French anthropologist David Le Breton (2014) thinks that as young people all over the world stock up on the same things and are connected to the same social networks, they end up being like clones. They wear the same clothes, they have the same haircuts, they use the same mobiles and they listen to the same music. The market aims at wiping out subjectivity. In other words, for the market there is no difference between the Self and the O/other, the Same only exists.

Undoubtedly, globalization has enabled us to establish contact with foreign cultures through the media and the internet. But how do we relate to those cultures? Bauman (2007) says we relate to reality through consumerism. We do not live our lives, but rather consume them. We no longer live in a society of producers but in a society of consumers, which is divided into things to be chosen (commodities) and their choosers (consumers). Nevertheless, "...the most prominent feature of the society of consumers –however carefully concealed and most thoroughly covered up – is the transformation of consumers into commodities; or rather their dissolution into the sea of commodities" (Bauman, 2007, p.12). The Self and the O/other have become commodities.

The status of the O/other as a marketable object involves the loss of its aura. It has been stripped of its complexity and ends up being a flat thing ready to be accepted and bought by everyone all over the world. It is an item which has been deprived of its context and thus, of its meaning. It is no longer a multidimensional entity but a cultural stereotype created by the market to meet global demand. All in all, the O/other is the same wherever you go: the same news about Syria, the same goods from Indonesia, the same Thai food. And even though there is diversity and this creates the illusion of O/otherness, this variety only permits differences that conform to the system. It is an O/otherness that has been made consumable.

The Expulsion of Dissent

The expulsion of the O/other also implies the expulsion of dissent. Byung-Chul Han (2017) says we live in the society of the "like". There is no "dislike" button on Facebook. The system does not give us the chance to object, to contradict, to oppose, to resist. We have lost the negativity of the Against. We live in a culture of likeability. Politicians, for instance, seek to be likeable. They keep an eye on public opinion. If it changes, they change their views, too. They lack commitment, conviction and vision. Groucho Marx's words echo in our minds: "These are my principles. If you don't like them, I have others".

Moreover, obscure computer codes called algorithms prevent us from encountering the O/other on the web. By filtering and personalizing the contents that they show us they isolate us from opposing views. Therefore, we are only likely to come across things and people that agree with our established preferences. This phenomenon is what Eli Pariser dubbed the "filter bubble" (Caitlin Dewey, 2015). The final outcome is an endless ego loop. As we pass over those who are unfamiliar and instead find those who are like-minded, our horizon of experience becomes narrower and narrower. This can only exacerbate and perpetuate our own biases.

Likewise, Bauman (2007) points out: "The society of consumers has developed (...) the capacity to absorb all and any dissent it inevitably (...) breeds - and then to recycle it as a major resource of its reproduction, reinvigoration and expansion" (p.48). This means that attitudes and actions which are threatening to the system are integrated in the prevailing order. Thus, dissent is nipped in the bud, sterilized, defused and made irrelevant. Bauman adds that this is possible thanks to a weakening of human bonds, often referred to as "individualization". This process of social disintegration makes it impossible for isolated individual consumers to articulate dissent.

Like the O/other, dissent has been reduced to a commodity. In *Commodify Your Dissent* (1997) Thomas Frank and Matt Weiland state that today's consumerism is not so much about 'conformity' but mostly about 'difference'. We do not consume to fit in but to prove ourselves that we can be rock-and-roll rebels. This explains how Che Guevara's image ended up on T-shirts sold all over the world. Is the person who buys the T-shirt undermining the very foundations of

capitalism by doing so? On the contrary, her purchase only keeps its wheels oiled and turning.

As there is little room for dissent, there is more room for hatred. There are very few dissenters in today's world, but there are lots of haters. Digital shitstorms prove this point. When you dissent, you hold an opinion different from the one officially held. In other words, you do not conform, but still you acknowledge the existence of the O/other. When you hate, you simply repel and expel the O/other. Furthermore, hatred implies a lack of respect. In this connection, Byung-Chul Han (2017) says that "... respect forms the foundation for the public, or civil, sphere. When the former weakens, the latter collapses" (p.1). In fact, as it has already been pointed out, we are going through a process of social disintegration. Individuals come together as a swarm but fail to develop a "we" (Byung-Chul Han, 2017).

By looking at the world around us it is easy to conclude that this expulsion of the O/other is clearly not leading us to peace and harmony. On the contrary, it has unleashed very violent and destructive forces: terrorism, nationalism, xenophobia and fundamentalism. All these movements share a common feature: a strong anti-globalization feeling. They represent the crazy and evil resistance of the singular against the global proliferation of the Same. They long for an identity, which can give them security and calm. An enemy is a fast supplier of identity but it also brings about fear. Hence, we live in a society of fear, which is in fact a society of hatred (Byung-Chul Han, 2018)

The expulsion of the O/other and dissent jeopardises democracy, which implies acceptance and respect for the plurality of views. A democratic society is certainly not a society of hatred. A democratic society is not just a society where people are at a liberty to dissent. It is, in fact, a society that fosters diversity and dissent. In this sense, literature has an important role to play.

The role of literature in today's world

Literature creates an oasis in the desert of the Same. It produces a gap in the gaplessness of the Same because it escapes from the negation of meaning that commodification and globalization impose. First and foremost, each literary work is unique in itself. It is the outcome of the writer's craft, and as such it is not interchangeable with any other.

This uniqueness is built upon a distinctive arrangement of words, which results in the creation of meaning. Secondly, while globalization and commodification strip the O/other of its meaning and complexity, literature is a gateway to other cultures. The O/other still exists in a literary text, because it has not been deprived of its complexity. Literature offers a haven, where real voices from faraway places can still be heard. For instance, lots of voices from Africa deserve to be taken into account. Adichie and Achebe talk about the Biafran war. Yvonne Vera and NoViolet Bulawayo give us some hints of Zimbabwe's difficult reality. Nadine Gordimer tells us about the horrors of apartheid. Coetzee and Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo question the supremacy of English as a world language. Thirdly, the lack of meaning leads to anxiety and distress. In a Ted Talk called "The Reality Constructed by Stories" the Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainana says that humans tell stories in an attempt to make sense out of the chaos of experience. It is basically a human need. Aristotle in his *Poetics* talks about catharsis when he refers to the purifying effect on emotions tragedy has on spectators. Psychoanalysis also knows a lot about the soothing effect of storytelling.

Additionally, literature welcomes dissent. In 1967 R. Barthes wrote an essay called "The death of the author". In this text he argues that it is useless to retrace the author's intentions and original meaning in mind. This means that there is not just one point of view, the author's, but as many as there are readers (Barthes, R., 1977). Literary texts are polysemic. They bring about multiple meanings and thus, multiple interpretations. As a result, various points of views can coexist in harmony. Therefore, reading literature generates a democratic environment since it brings about dissent, in other words, plural and opposing views.

Literature also creates bonds and a sense of community upon which nations and empires have been founded. In a letter in 1882 W. Yeats proclaimed that there was no nationality without literature and no literature without nationality. *The Aeneid* by Vergil is a clear example of how the Roman Empire needed a story to legitimize itself. *Civilization and Barbarism* by D.F. Sarmiento also supported the birth of the Argentinian nation. A compelling story has the power to create a "we" and this feeling of membership is what constructs people's identity.

All in all, literature gives room for the O/other and dissent. It provides meaning and identity. However, some scholars such as W. Marx (2005) and A. Compagnon (2006) think that growing indifference is killing literature in the Western world. Its presence and power have been waning in the last decades. Young people do not listen to writers as they used to in the sixties. Many consider reading boring because it requires long moments of solitude and stillness (Compagnon, 2006). By and large, we are witnessing growing cultural illiteracy.

On the other hand, in countries such as Iran literature reveals the extent of its power. In this respect Azar Nafisi (2015), the Iranian author of *Reading Lolita in Teheran* says:

... people in repressive societies tend to take great risks to read banned books, watch banned films and listen to banned music. For them literature is not simply a path toward literacy or a necessary step in their education. It is a basic need, a way to reclaim an identity confiscated by the state (p.11-12).

Either way, the outlook is bleak. Neither censorship nor indifference is auspicious.

Teaching for liberty

What is the role of the literature teacher under the current circumstances? First and foremost, teachers should teach for liberty, which means teachers should teach for democracy. Liberty strongly correlates with democracy, despite the limitations that democracy puts on liberty. Democracy safeguards free speech, i.e., the plurality of views, and thus, the existence of the O/other.

In her book *The Republic of Imagination* Azar Nafisi (2015) says that a democracy cannot survive without a democratic imagination. A democracy is based on ideas, imagination, meanings and connections, empathy and curiosity. Literature teachers should use the democratic power of literature to help lay the foundations of the republic of imagination Azar Nafisi talks about. Such an endeavour entails creating communities of readers, people passionate about ideas and imagination. A book club, for instance, is a wonderful way to connect people with literature and with others.

Moreover, democracy and liberty are concepts closely related to citizenship. Students should be helped to become citizens of the world rather than consumers. While consumers

are passive, citizens are active. While consumers are concerned about themselves, citizens are concerned about their community. Citizens, and not consumers, are the real participants in a democracy.

Additionally, citizenship requires the ability to think critically. This means that teaching for liberty goes hand in hand with reading for dissent. In other words, students should also be encouraged to read literature critically. They should be able to question stereotypes, have their own point of view and be ready to debate.

Furthermore, teachers ought to instill the love of reading literature in their students. Tzvetan Todorov (2007) says that in order to do so teachers should go beyond the conception of literature as a self-sufficient object without any relevant connection with the surrounding world. Literature is not about what critics think and say but about the human condition. It is simply about life and everybody has an opinion about it. Students should realize that literature is not just a simple distraction, a luxury, an entertainment reserved for educated people, but a tool to expand our universe and fulfill our human potential. In an exquisite article called "Reading literature can make us better" Alberto Manguel (2019) points out that literature has an invaluable social power. It makes us more empathic, more willing to listen and understand others. It makes us curious about others.

Conclusion

We live in a hell of sameness due to commodification. In the consumer society only commodities exist. The Self and the O/other have been expelled. Meaning and dissent have also been left out.

As a result, even though we live in a highly interconnected world thanks to the internet and trade, we are not closer to each other than we used to be. On the contrary, hatred and fear are building up as a response against the rule of the Same. Under these circumstances, democracy is in jeopardy.

However, literature offers a different kind of resistance since it does not deprive the O/other and the Self of their meaning and complexity. It reveals the gap between them and at the same time it seeks to bridge that gap. Thus, it is the perfect gateway to foreign cultures. Literature also welcomes dissent since literary texts are polysemic and allow different

interpretations.

Hence, democracy needs literature but it also needs teachers to help spread ideas, stir imagination, spark curiosity, foster empathy and encourage critical thinking. The foundations of the republic of imagination Azar Nafisi refers to cannot be laid by consumers. Democracy calls for citizens.

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