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2. FRANCIS EBEJER'S STRUGGLE WITH EDUCATION

Teachers and Their Students in Postcolonial Literature

I saw history through the sea-washed eyes
Of our choleric, ginger-haired headmaster
– Derek Walcott, 'Homage to Gregorias'

INTRODUCTION

Modern colonial rulers used a variety of methods to control the communities they dominated. Force of arms and missionary work were usually at the forefront, but education was always closely behind. As late as 1929, the Jesuit H.M. Dubois wrote in the *Journal of the International African Institute* that colonised societies were made up of 'inferior races' and that the choice educators had was either to assimilate the indigenous people into Europeans (the irony of which escapes the writer) or else to adapt their pedagogy to the limits of the indigenous culture. The missionary/pedagogue/ethnologist was convinced not only of the superiority of European culture, but also of the conviction on the part of indigenous peoples that their culture was inferior and their willingness to accept that Europeanness which the European benefactors were willing to impart to them (Dubois, 1929a). His theory of adaptation was benevolently hoping to eventually permit 'our blacks' to become complete human beings (Dubois, 1929b). Although attitudes to education in the colonies varied widely from colony to colony and from coloniser to coloniser (British educators, for example, were less likely to make arguments for assimilation than their French counterparts) Dubois's attitude is quite typical. Education in the colonies was very often left in the hands of missionaries, and governments were generally reluctant to part with their money to finance large-scale education efforts. However, measures were often taken to ensure that enough indigenous people got the type of education deemed necessary so that they could assist in keeping the colonial system running.

FRANCIS EBEJER AND OTHER COLONIAL LEGACIES

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2012, p. 36) reflects that these colonialist perceptions, which pervade even the mentality of the most well-meaning contemporary westerners today, can be attributed to the way knowledge started to be conceived during the Enlightenment, and especially through Hegel's philosophy and his discussion of the relationship between master and slave. Since the Enlightenment, knowledge

came to be seen not only as of paramount importance, but more crucially to be situated in the West. Europeans, having come to what was seen as this modern knowledge, usurped the right to rule over non-Europeans in this master/slave binary opposition. Colonial education, as we saw in the writing of Henri Marie Dubois, was based on the concept of taking civilisation to the natives. It was a part of what was often referred to as 'white man's burden', a mission that Europeans felt obliged to accomplish as a moral obligation in return for being endowed with a superior civilisation. However, this civilising mission was hardly ever intended to give the colonised an equal standing, even in colonised territory, because colonialism as a system depended on the maintenance of racial superiority by Europeans over their non-European subjects.

Most educational systems developed in the colonies had as their aim 'extending the regulation and usefulness of the colonized' (Willinsky, 1998, p. 89). Access to education was limited and selective. The natives were given that type of education that enabled them to communicate with their colonisers that made them '*almost the same but not white*' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 89). Such systems then gave a specialised education or training to students earmarked for leadership within their community. Very often those selected were lifted out of their environment and sent to study in the metropolitan centre, where they would be in awe of the superior civilisation of their master and return home utterly ashamed of their culture of origin (Fanon, 1986, pp. 37-39). These were the elites necessary to prop the institutions in the colonies, be it as head teachers or academics, top civil servants or judges, if these top jobs became available to the indigenous population.

Francis Ebejer was a product of just such a colonial education system. He had two teachers as parents, his mother one of the first teachers at the Central School for girls, his father a headmaster trusted enough by the Director of Education to be asked to draft what would end up as the only grammar of the Maltese language recognised by law (Felice Pace, 2009, p. 34, footnote 36). Yet, Ebejer's relationship with education and the teaching profession was ambiguous. The career he attempted first was medicine, but he gave up his studies after a few months. It was only after working as interpreter for the British Army in the latter part of the Second World War that he took up a career in teaching and was fast-tracked for leadership in the profession. He was awarded a scholarship to study at St Mary's College in Twickenham and when he completed the course he was appointed headmaster in state schools, a post he retained until he retired at around 52 years of age. In spite of his training he would declare, towards the end of his life, that he was 'largely self-taught', just like his parents (Ebejer, 1989, p. 19). Teaching was not his first love, and similarly ambiguous was Ebejer's relationship with colonialism itself. On the dust jacket of one of his first novels published in London, this statement stands out:

Ebejer says he finds the English language the best vehicle for his ideas and he intends to combine writing novels with his present job of teaching. He now lives in London, is married to an English girl from Southampton and they have two children, both at school in England. (Ebejer, 1958, dust jacket)

Given that the text was prepared for a predominantly British public, it can be assumed that Ebejer is emphasising qualities that he thinks might appeal to them. However, the picture that is being painted is of someone who has accepted the gifts of his coloniser: his women, his language and his education. As Fanon stated 'A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language' (Fanon, 1986, p. 18). It is a measure of colonialism's success when its subjects accept its values as their own. There is of course the issue, first highlighted by Fanon himself, of the colonial subject trying to behave as similarly to his colonial master as possible to gain the respect that is refused to colonial subjects who are perceived to be lower down in the hierarchy of civilised races.

The wearing of European clothes, whether rags or the most up-to-date style; using European furniture and European forms of social intercourse; adorning the Native language with European expressions; using bombastic phrases in speaking or writing a European language; all these contribute to a feeling of equality with the European and his achievements. (D. Westerman, quoted in Fanon, 1986, p. 25)

Education was a subject that Ebejer discussed continuously in his works. It is difficult to find a work of any considerable length that does not make references to teaching or education. On the other hand, there is not a single play, novel or short story in which a discussion of teaching is the sole or main interest of the author. If we were to take the title story of his collection of short stories *For Rožina a Husband and other stories*, the schoolmaster is depicted as one of the village authorities. His position in society is on a par with that of the priest, the doctor and the notary. Likewise, education is one of the institutions that Ebejer very often chooses to target, in fact much more frequently than any other agency in society.

THE TEACHER AND COLONIAL AGENCY

Although his attitude towards education differs from one work to another, he generally regards the institution of education as a negative influence on people. Perhaps his harshest condemnation is found in *L-Imnarja Żmien il-Qtil*, a play from 1973, when a university student, speaking about her professor says, 'Kultant l-iskola hekk tagħmillek. Trabbilek il-qarnita f'għajnejk' (Ebejer, 1997, p. 54). The phrase cannot be properly translated, as it literally means that it makes an octopus grow in your eyes, implying that it does not let you see properly. However the reference is really to a disease that needs surgery to cure (Serracino Inglott, 1981, p. 197). The university professor referred to is included in the play as an example of all that is wrong with education. He is introduced in one brief scene as a drunken reveller, unable to act rationally. When he is sober enough to hold a conversation, we realise that he is the exact opposite of what we expect an academic to be. He is certainly not intelligent, and Ebejer makes it clear that he wants us to regard him as a useless member of society, a parasite almost. To make the issue absolutely clear, Ebejer compares the Professor to his illiterate brother, who is portrayed as an intelligent, caring individual. It is in this context that education is blamed for

making the professor the incomplete human being that he is. Set in the context of a play about the sense of direction young people of the post-Independence period need, it is a strong accusation of the educational system and its representatives. Not only is education irrelevant, but the persons tasked with delivering it are actually a burden on society.

In another play of the 1970s, *Meta Morna tal-Mellieħa*, there is a longer exposition of this problem. The main character in the play, an elderly matriarch whose conservatism Ebejer takes very seriously, claims that all the ills in her family stemmed from her husband's insistence on giving their offspring an education, as this severed them from their agricultural roots, but did not substitute this with a useful philosophy of life. In fact her son, who had taken an office job, is in early retirement and is stuck in his room, contemplating what he considers humanity's failings. Other members of the family are likewise unstable and the direction they seek does not come from learning, or at least not from formal education:

L-iskola wehidha wehidha u maqtugħa għal rasha fit-triqat tal-bliet x'tiswa?
Deni ... deni kbir. U hsara kbira. L-art hi ommna, minn ġufha ġejna u lura
għal ġufha għad irridu mmorru. Ma nwarrbuhieħ għax gwaj għalina ...

What is learning on its own and left alone in the cities worth? It's harmful.
The land is our mother, out of her womb we're born and to her womb we
shall return. We must not distance ourselves ... (Ebejer, 1977, p. 100)

These two examples show that Ebejer considered education as a defective system. However it is only in his last play, *Il-Għan ta' Bingemma* that he explains clearly why he had so little faith in the educational system. The play is an attempt at analysing contemporary Maltese society's failings, which Ebejer attributed mainly to a rapid rise in materialism. However, in an outstanding scene from the play, he creates a nightmare scenario where a female teacher tries to teach a non-English speaking pupil to sing 'Ba ba black sheep', only managing to reduce him to tears and herself to desperation. The scene is interspersed with statements and questions from unnamed and unspecified characters who behave as if they are interrogating the pupil without waiting for replies. The atmosphere created in the scene leads to an insistent accusation of the system, but with many statements leading us to think of the colonial past as the main culprit. The emphasis on language takes this scene right into one of the most hotly debated issues in postcolonial studies. In a way this is a variant on the Prospero/Caliban syndrome. The teacher is behaving like a colonial master, assuming that the colonial subject is unable to speak because he does not possess the master's language, and is therefore trying to teach the young student English. Her failure to do so leaves the child silent, or at best babbling noises which sound very similar to Caliban's cursing (Ebejer, 1985, pp. 71-73).

The teacher in this context is an agent of colonialism, trying to impose a culture that will only serve the coloniser himself. Ironically, it is only when the same young boy accepts to make the most of his education that he can become a complete human being. Tellingly, Ebejer does not explain how the student

reconciles himself to his teachers. It is only his books that seem to save him from being a failure of the educational system. In the end he graduates as an engineer, a profession Ebejer seemed to think highly of in his last years, but the most interesting twist is that he turns himself into a sort of informal teacher, giving lectures to groups of young people and conducting cultural tours, apparently in an attempt to make up for the lacunae left by formal education (Ebejer, 1985, p. 111). The scenario that one can pick out from this late play is that Ebejer, while still convinced that the Maltese educational system was tied down by its colonial origins and its Eurocentric practices, was a necessary tool available to the previously colonised population to emancipate itself.

In the same year as *Il-Ġaħan ta' Bingemma* was first performed and published, Ebejer also published his only Maltese language novel, *Storja: Il-Harsa ta' Ruzann*. It is the story of the emancipation of a Maltese rural family from its very humble beginnings in the mid-19th century to a family of professionals and artists in the late 20th century. Unlike what he implies or declares in most of his other works, here emancipation can only be achieved through education. In fact many characters in the novel insist on giving their children the best education they can afford, even if it goes against what is expected of people in their social class (Ebejer, 2011, pp. 42-44, 48). Education is the only solution when all other agencies have failed you. In fact, the first lengthy mention of the need for education comes just after the family of farmers had been attacked by a band of thieves and their appeal to the authorities to help them out had gone unheeded. It is clear that the agents of the colonial state, in this case the police and the local authorities are not interested in protecting people who are too distant from colonial interests, who neither produce anything that matters nor pose any threat to the stability of the colonial state. At the time (1874) public schooling had not yet reached many of the rural communities, and the missionary schools common in many other colonies were never available. Therefore, families like the one in the novel had to use the services of privately organised classes run by ladies who themselves generally only had a very basic education. Later generations of the same family accepted the schooling that was then offered by the colonial state, even though it was not necessary for them to participate. Education is their way out of being passive colonial subjects. The importance of education within the colonial context is made clearest in an argument between a village sacristan and a mother about the Boer Wars. While the sacristan claims that the Boer is a race of black savages, the mother corrects him, stating that they are both white and educated. Race, civilisation and education go hand in hand. If you're white you're civilised and you deserve (or already have) an education. It suddenly dawns on the Maltese woman that the only way for her son to grow up to be different from his fellow countrymen, content in their meaningless existence, is to accept that the coloniser's civilisation is superior to his own and that he needs to try to absorb as much of this civilisation as he can to stand a chance. Education, therefore, is a way for the colonised subject to acquire a voice that can speak to his colonial master. Not only is education important for the emancipation of this family, but in a particular point in their family's, and their country's history, its members join the teaching

profession and become its worthy representatives. It is certainly not a coincidence that Ebejer chooses the first decades of the twentieth century to promote his characters to the teaching profession. It is a period when the country is passing through important political changes, and the two married teachers in the novel appear to be particularly insightful of the changes taking place, and even more practical than politicians themselves. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Ebejer sees them as independent intellectuals who can see beyond the limitations of local politicians (Ebejer, 2011, p. 100).

In this work education replaces working the land as a means to remaining a complete human being. In his earlier works Ebejer seemed to believe that the clock could somehow be turned back to the time before modernism and before colonialism when the Maltese population was at peace with itself. However, it is clear that at some point Ebejer realised that the pre-colonial condition can never be recovered. It is ironic that the land that Ebejer credited in many of his works to being the only hope that Maltese people had against the annihilation resulting from the evils of modernity, which included education (see also Fanon, 1967, p. 34), is no longer there to be tilled but to be admired from afar and painted (Ebejer, 2011, p. 118). This may be one of the reasons for a relatively passive attitude towards education in some of his later works. At the same time, it is important to underline the fact that one of the objectives of colonialism was always to create a situation where the colonised would come to accept colonialism as the natural order of things.

EBEJER'S TEXTS AND THE EDUCATIONAL PROJECT OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Here again Ebejer's passionate engagement with the issue of emancipatory possibilities of education is marked by his critical perspectives of the teacher as one who has not yet understood her reproductive role in sustaining dominant cultures that alienate rather than educate her people. The teacher has been lifted out of the darkness by being enticed to follow the paths of the Enlightenment, or at least that version of the Enlightenment that was made available to colonised subjects. The Enlightenment is itself a project of education that promises autonomous living. Kant describes it as 'man's exit from his self-incurred immaturity' which 'is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another'. Sapere aude! Have courage to use your own understanding is thus the motto of enlightenment (Kant, 1996, p. 58).

Ebejer's teachers, themselves members of the colonised community, are not so guilty of being immature because of their lack of understanding of this educational project of the Enlightenment but rather because ironically they have not been able to be critical of it, and to free themselves of the culture of Enlightenment that, as explained earlier on, has rendered them slaves. This points to the contradictory aspects of Enlightenment's rationality and particularly to the fact that the Enlightenment has constructed ideal models of being human that render those who do not fit them, inhuman. The teachers' awareness of the importance of this educational project to indigenous people leads them towards a relatively simple

adoption of its rationale without taking account of their own cultures and knowledges. The teachers may successfully adapt to this foreign way of life or as we have argued, they may even reject their own culture but their students frequently suffer from acute alienation and the feeling of not belonging to the culture of the school, as Ebejer showed in the scene from *Il-Ġahan ta' Bingemma* discussed above.

Ironically we can use the very explanations given by Kant to describe Ebejer's teachers' inability to take other educational pathways that are meaningful to their own people. 'This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another' (Kant, 1996, p. 58).

The trouble does not end when one has become critical of the rigid oppressive workings of the educational trajectories of the Enlightenment itself or when one has become enlightened enough to realise that his educational experiences have just rendered him a slave to its rationality. Neither does a simple resolution to become independent of this borrowed sense of freedom release him from the grasp of a dominant mainstream culture.

This is the experience of ambivalence and contradiction experienced in the novel *In the Eye of the Sun* (Ebejer, 1969) by Joseph, whose education has estranged him from his indigenous Maltese identity. One might argue that the very education that has taught him to critically think in living an autonomous life has made him conscious of its colonising effects. Nevertheless this has thrown him into the abyss of a hybridised existence that has led him to the painful struggle to retrieve an obscured Maltese identity.

In the novel, Ebejer gives an account of the metamorphosis of a young man, Joseph, on abandoning his medical studies at the very end of the course to live a simpler life in the countryside of his birth. The novel lays down the authoritarian modes of an educational system that assumes to know the right ways of living, imposing rigid truths through a systematic belittling of whoever has not experienced it. Ebejer's writing points to the ways that colonisers continue to exert their influence on developing ones through systems of teaching (Altbach, 1995). Education is presented as the cure by which distressed people move out of savage states of being. Joseph's refusal to become a doctor in spite of the fact that he only has a few months left to graduate can be read as his mode of resisting the coloniser's mentality that medicalises nations thought to be in need of a cure. Ebejer's postcolonial critiques of an overwhelmingly Westernised educational system are effectively metaphorised through Joseph's rejection of the books that were a very important part of his life. Joseph's enlightenment is ironically marked by this refusal of a colonial education and by his critical awareness that foreign text books metaphorically and literally do not speak his language. Joseph learns to autonomously make decisions without the advice of other doctors, priests and even his own teachers yet this does not make him the self-realised human being as claimed by the Enlightenment. The trajectories that Joseph follows lead him to a loss of self rather than self-improvement. So much so that he ends up losing his own life.

Ebejer presents the regressive mental, emotional, and physical changes of Joseph's self-destructive paths as ambiguous and makes us inquire into the risks of opting not to take up certain educational opportunities in spite of their limiting colonial influences. As readers we ponder on the contradictions inherent in the educational project of the Enlightenment. If autonomy is the outcome of an educational experience that makes one think with his own mind why did Joseph have to pay such a high price for attempting to live freely and move out of a colonising educational system? If Joseph is so aware of the dangers of a colonised education why does he give his medicine books to Karla, the love of his life? Joseph himself explains that 'the process of freeing the bird out of his cage after being caught may be fearful and painful' (Ebejer, 1969, p. 98).

THE TEACHER OF WHITE LITERATURE

The postcolonial tones in this novel reverberate mostly through the issue of whiteness that Ebejer makes good use of in critically analysing the way it pervades the lives of the main characters and especially that of Joseph. Ebejer presents the problems of white privilege in relation to education and issues of affect and as we shall explain later on with literature and the teaching of literature itself. Joseph's disgust with the whiteness of the skin of some characters in this novel directly points to his awareness of the way his life has been dominated by whiteness. Bailey and Zita (2007) describe whiteness as a cultural disposition and ideology held in place by specific political, social, moral, aesthetic, epistemic, metaphysical, economic, legal, and historical conditions, crafted to preserve white identity and relations of white supremacy' (p. vii).

Even if writing decades before the onset of whiteness studies, Ebejer discusses the problem of whiteness and the function of education that hegemonises it, in relation to the professor of medicine and his daughter, Joseph's first love. The professor of medicine embodies whiteness. His whiteness stands for its institutionalisation and the dominance of the white curriculum that has alienated him from his native colour. Joseph has a perverse affective relation with this whiteness. He has grown to love his white teacher, he even came around to love his daughter but he finds that he can never make love to anyone who is white. This is not so much a racist attitude by Joseph but a result of his awareness that he cannot intimately relate to that which has not respected his colour and which has even sought to change it.

Ebejer's description of the professor's white skin as a metaphor of the white supremacy that dominates the educational structures and practices reminds one of Fanon's explanation of the schizophrenic experiences of black people in a white world. The white intellectual orientation of the professor has invaded Joseph's ways of being. Fanon describes this as a white mask, a new identity that has been placed on a man to conceal his black skin in an attempt to make him forget and repudiate his origins (1986, pp. 20-21). However, Ebejer's understanding of the pervasiveness of whiteness is even stronger than what Fanon's metaphor of the white mask implies. Whiteness has become essential to his being and he cannot get

rid of it. 'Cut into the rigid flesh, white flesh; it remains white even as he acts deeper. Within the decomposing precincts however deep he goes, the white remains. Unto putrefaction, he knows, the white will be there' (Ebejer, 1969, p. 24).

Fanon explains that the coloured customs have been 'wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilisation that he did not know and that imposed itself on him (Fanon, 1986, p. 110). In realising this, Joseph's painful and deadly trajectories are not only instigated by a hybridised split existence which Fanon explains as trying to live two different cultures and identities at once but by his decision to eradicate all that is white from his life. Ebejer here, like Fanon, wants to highlight the impossibilities of recuperating from the pervasive effects of a white, colonial educational experience.

Ebejer's account of the white teacher and her collaboration in this colonial project becomes even more relevant to the issue of the teacher in literature. The novel describes the village schoolmaster's attempts to convert Joseph back to his studies, by reminding him of 'the great white women of the world's greatest works' (Ebejer, 1969, p. 73) that they had read when Joseph was younger. For the schoolmaster the white women in the works of Dante and Petrarch represented mankind's transcendence from that which is considered to be primitive and related to earth. The white women manifest a white literature which is an emblem of modern civilisation.

The great mesdames, harken, *qalbi*, the magnificent creatures whose walk is a poem, whose every sigh is an ode, whole breath, texture of limb and colour of skin by virtue of a high intelligence and the purest of spirits, inspire great minds and lift humanity ever upwards towards a great destiny. (Ebejer, 1969, p. 74)

Here again Joseph's critical awareness of the distance between him and the white women he had read about in the literary texts, but that he had never managed to find are indicative of a literary experience that was removed from his culture; its 'brown spirit, the earth'. Joseph's critical awareness of the whiteness of the literature that dominated his childhood leads him to a re-reading of the canonical texts and to a reinterpretation of the 'educational' function of literature. He departs from his schoolmaster's notion of literature as that associated with all that is civilised. For Joseph, the great poets were not drawn to writing by some civilising mission but by opening their hearts to earth, nature and the 'brown spirits' of the women underlying their white skin (p. 75). It is the teacher that has drawn upon literature in the educational project of colonisation. Ebejer's cheeky description of 'the bottle of creme-de-menthe that had been separating *The Complete works of Byron* from *A Handbook of Suggestions for Teachers*' (Ebejer, 1969, p. 119) points to the use of literature by the teacher in imposing a culture on students that has the same alienating effect as that of an alcoholic drink.

EDUCATIONAL POSSIBILITIES IN EBEJER'S HYBRID LITERATURE

As argued earlier on in this chapter Ebejer as a teacher and writer was a product of a white colonial educational project. Nevertheless Ebejer, conscious of the difficulties in shedding the white skin that he has developed, seeks the free space of literature to speak about the impossibility of writing outside the literary and/or educational machinery. Ebejer therefore makes use of literature which is frequently used as the master's tools in an attempt to dismantle the master's house and to make his readers critically reflect on the double binds of the very literary text that they are reading. This points to an understanding of resistance as that which is complexly related to ideas of human freedom and liberty drawn from the culture of the colonisers as we explained earlier. This ambivalent experience of drawing upon an acquired language to critique its very colonising effects reflects the double position of the writer and his coming to terms with the hybrid possibilities of literature. This hybrid experience need not necessarily lead to the schizophrenic split existence that Fanon describes. Neither does it need to follow the steps of Joseph who loses his life in oscillating between colonised and colonising cultures.

The possibilities of the experiences of hybridity are realised by Ebejer, the writer himself who creates a hybrid literature that reflects its colonial legacies through the very critique of its colonising effects. Ebejer's writing may not defy the aesthetic norms of western literature but it can be considered as hybrid in that it makes the reader read into the text in a deconstructive manner. In this way Ebejer's writings are not simply reflective of a colonising culture but are critically engaged with it to produce hybrid works of literatures. As Bhabha (1994) explains, hybrid literatures bring together the cultures of the colonisers and the colonised in an attempt to go beyond the deadly effects of an alienating literature. They do this by bringing in indigenous signs and drawing on native understandings to give new meanings to imposed oppressive cultures.

Ebejer, especially through his English language novels, attempts exactly this. His novels are formally very English, using story-telling that is at home in Western literature. The novels, however, are also rooted in the colonised culture that begot them and this continues to contribute to a critical reading of the coloniser's and colonising aspects of literature. Not only are most of the narratives about the struggle of the Maltese to come to terms with their colonisation and decolonisation, but the language itself is no longer the language acquired from the colonial rulers, but a different form of English (see Ashcroft, 2009). There is also that part of his *oeuvre* which consciously refuses to communicate through English and addresses his fellow countrymen through a language that has remained alien to the colonisers. This language is intentionally used to generate a literature that can be termed postcolonial. In challenging colonial impositions in this manner, Ebejer as a writer himself can be considered as an educator who has become engaged in educational trajectories that go beyond the double binds of the colonial experiences of teachers and their students.

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