

7th World Conference on Educational Sciences, (WCES-2015), 05-07 February 2015, Novotel
Athens Convention Center, Athens, Greece

What's in a culture? What's in a novel?

Linda Green^{a*} Gul Celkan^b

^aMiddle Georgia State College, Macon, Georgia, 31206, USA

^bMiddle Georgia State College, Macon, Georgia, 31206, USA

Abstract

Cultural heritage, as an evolving pattern of human interaction, vitalizes members of society. And in our present day world where globalization plays a major role, cultural studies, rather than adherence to literary studies, have gained significance. Thus there has been a trend to shift from traditional literary studies to cultural studies, which takes us to the concept around which this paper is formed. The novel *Tales from the Expat Harem: Foreign Women in Modern Turkey* by Anastasia Ashman and Jennifer Eaton Gokmen was used and students were asked to write briefly what they learned about the Turkish culture, and their overall views on the book. Interestingly enough, almost all of them believed the book exposed them to a culture they had no prior knowledge about, and a good number of them thought they should follow the footsteps of the expats and immerse themselves in new cultures.

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Peer-review under responsibility of Academic World Education and Research Center.

Keywords: culture; Turkish culture; Expat harem; expats; student responses

1. Introduction

It is a reality that education and culture are closely related to each other. In fact, it is impossible to say whether it is the education that influences culture or the culture influences the educational system within that society. One thing is clear though; these two closely are intertwined. We should not put this fact into oblivion; in this globalization era, society has become more multicultural than ever before, and educational systems are challenged with the issues of cultural diversity of students in the college context.

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* Linda Green. Tel.: +1 478 788 1239.

E-mail address: lindagreen44@att.net

day world where globalization plays a major role, cultural studies, rather than adherence to literary studies, have gained significance. Thus there has been a trend to shift from traditional literary studies to cultural studies, which takes us to the concept around which this paper is formed.

Since we are living in a multicultural society, we, as educators, need to reconsider our curricula and integrate cultural elements so as to raise awareness in students about what culture is, and to expose students to foreign cultures.

Culture, which is viewed as stable and dynamic, deals with the themes of shared values, beliefs and behaviors that are transmitted through generations. However, it must not be put into oblivion that cultural and social identities may change or even do change through time due to interaction with other cultures, because of immigration, education, and even due to the changes in the living standards.

Multicultural education aims to empower students by considering their needs. Students are hence expected to become aware of how issues of race, ethnicity, culture, language, religion, gender, and abilities/disabilities are intertwined with educational process and content. A curriculum that incorporates cultural studies with fair and accurate content in the course will definitely equip students with the following skills:

- students will feel prepared for diverse workplaces and multicultural environments
- students will feel less biased toward stereotypes and policies that can restrict achievement
- students will comprehend how acquisition of these skills will help accommodate diverse teaching styles of teachers and learning patterns of students
- the curriculum will help students, faculty, and staff to become advocates for multicultural awareness (Aydin, 2012)

Following consolidation in 2013, Middle Georgia State College began to assume an international identity and hence faculty have been encouraged to integrate cultural contexts into their course syllabus. This was the starting point for assigning the novel *Tales from the Expat Harem: Foreign Women in Modern Turkey* by Anastasia Ashman and Jennifer Eaton Gokmen as a common reader.

The editors describe the book as, “an illuminating anthology [that] provides a window into the country from the perspective of thirty-two expatriates from seven different nations—artists, entrepreneurs, Peace Corps volunteers, archaeologists, missionaries, and others—who established lives in Turkey for work, love, or adventure. Through narrative essays covering the last four decades, these diverse women unveil the mystique of the “Orient,” describe religious conflict, embrace cultural discovery, and maneuver familial traditions, customs, and responsibilities. The essays take readers to weddings and workplaces, down cobbled Byzantine streets, into boisterous bazaars along the Silk Road, and deep into the feminine stronghold of steamy Ottoman bathhouses.”

After reading the chapters in the novel, the students were asked to write down briefly what they learned about the Turkish culture, and their overall views on the book. Interestingly enough, almost all of them believed the book exposed them to a culture they had no prior knowledge about, and a good number of them thought they should follow the footsteps of the expats and immerse themselves in new cultures.

The comments and the interesting views of the students concerning a novel that has a setting beyond the boundaries of their own homeland form the basis of this qualitative paper. Exposition to a very distant culture reaped its benefits. Students showed tremendous interest in learning about foreign cultures as this gave them a better understanding of why people act in ways differing from their very own.

2. Tales from the Expat Harem: Foreign Women in Modern Turkey

The novel is comprised of the travels of thirty two women from the USA, England, Australia, Pakistan, Ireland, Netherlands, African American with Canadian roots and Holland. As one reads through the pages, one realizes that all the experiences of the women are unique and are predominantly told by these travelers which makes it a first hand account of all of their ordeals on Turkish soil. It is worthwhile mentioning the issues that inspired these travelers: relations in rural areas, rural wedding, urban wedding, Turkish bath (urban and rural), attitudes, belly dancing, arranged marriages, open market, Turkish hospitality, and food. Each and every issue is highlighted with interesting personal experiences of the travelers.

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