Malala Yousafzai and Intercultural Understanding: Reflections from the Delhi Darbar

Introduction by Professor Shafique Virani
Language - a Barrier to Illumination by Noor Rehman
The Road to Empathy by Caitlin McKinnon

“Hear ye! Hear ye!” began the proclamation on Blackboard, inviting the class to participate in the “Delhi Darbar.”

This year marked the creation of the first online course in Historical Studies, Search and Research: A Journey in Muslim Civilizations. Depending on the nature of their research projects, students were divided into guilds, including the Arabian Knights, Creative Workshop, English Academics, European Union, Persian Pilgrims, and South Asian Scholars. Each guild met on a weekly basis in a virtual “coffee house” to brainstorm its projects. The forum was particularly appropriate for this course on Muslim Civilizations, as the English word “coffee” is ultimately derived from Arabic qahwa (قهوة), testifying to the interconnectedness of the world in which we live. Traditionally, coffeehouses, or qahwa-khanas (as they were called in the Persianate world), were places where intellectuals, philosophers, travelers, poets, storytellers, artists, musicians, Sufis, and dignitaries would meet, discuss the issues of the day and the ways of the world, and enjoy a spirit of camaraderie. In Search and Research, the Cairo Café was where the students from each guild gathered to discuss their projects, sought help and advice from each other, and relished the conviviality and companionship of fellow travelers.

While the Cairo Café was a place for interacting with guild-mates on similar projects, the Delhi Darbar was a splendid intellectual levée of all the guilds on our research team. The Delhi Darbar helped students to collaborate with students from other guilds. While the word darbar has meant different things at various times and in diverse places, our Research Team’s Delhi Darbar was where we gathered online to listen to, for example, grand, thought-provoking orations of some of the world’s greatest living thinkers, or reflected on issues in the news as they related to our projects.

Early in the academic year, students in our group heard of an event that shook the world on October 9, 2012 - the savage shooting of a young girl named Malala Yousafzai by Taliban gunmen in the town of Mingora in Pakistan. Targeted for daring to advocate for female education, Malala was attacked as she

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returned home on her school bus. After reading various reports about this incident, students were asked to reflect on the following:

*While there has been almost universal condemnation of this assassination attempt against a young child, how much does the world know about this region of our planet? Would someone who has lived or grown up here in Canada be able to identify with Malala, her friends, and her struggle? Would Malala and her people be able to identify with children who are growing up here in Canada? How can we bridge this gap of understanding? How can we go beyond simple expressions of support and condemnation to something much deeper - true empathy?*

*Monika Bulaj, a brilliant photographer, believes that images can help, that images have stories to tell - stories that can transform our understanding of other people. She says, “I have been walking and traveling, by horses, by yak, by truck, by hitchhiking, from Iran’s border to the bottom, to the edge of the Wakhan Corridor. And in this way I could find ‘noor,’ the hidden light of Afghanistan.”*

*Watch Ms. Bulaj’s five-minute presentation at this URL: [http://www.ted.com/talks/monika_bulaj_the_hidden_light_of_afghanistan.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/monika_bulaj_the_hidden_light_of_afghanistan.html)*

*Then, in the Delhi Darbar, contribute your thoughts on the questions raised above, and on the topic, “What are unique and powerful ways we can use to create true understanding of people, cultures and societies that appear so distant from our own?” Equally important, share with the team what you personally would like to do to help foster greater understanding among the tremendous variety of human beings who share our planet.*

The following responses were submitted online by Noor Rehman of the South Asian Scholars and Caitlin McKinnon of the English Academics.

**Noor Rehman “Language - a Barrier to Illumination”**

As Monica Bulaj discovered the hidden light of Afghanistan, I believe that every culture, every nation, every religion has its own hidden light – a light that needs to be discovered, appreciated, and kindled. However, it seems to me that most of us roam around with closed eyes or tinted shades that prevent us from seeing the ‘noor’ in each of the beautiful cultures that we are fortunate to share our planet with.

In Toronto, we are fortunate to be blessed with a multicultural and relatively more tolerant society. However, in several places outside of this tolerant bubble, upon telling others of my birthplace, I have been asked whether Pakistan is a country or a city, or whether or not my country is “safe enough to visit”? This blatant ignorance and intolerance is at the root of many of the global issues that exist today. Although the assassination attempt on Malala brought to the world’s attention the fact that in a small northern town of Pakistan, girls were being oppressed and denied their right to an education, this, in my opinion, was merely a tiny step to achieving true understanding of their culture.

In one of his most famous works of fiction, *Smilla’s Sense of Snow*, the Danish writer, Peter Høeg, wrote, “There is one way to understand another culture. Living it. Move into it, ask to be tolerated as a guest,
learn the language.” I concur with Høeg that the only way to truly discover a culture is to live with the people, spend time in their homes, and share your life with them in return. This mutual relationship is what Monica Bulaj created by living with the Afghans and “sharing their bread and their prayers.” Had she remained in Poland and simply relied on news reports and propaganda to provide information about the Afghans, she would not have experienced their humility, tears, or hospitality.

For Ms. Bulaj, her stay in Afghanistan led to illumination. For the rest of us, her photographs might provide eye-opening ventures into the lives of the Afghan people, but that is only what they are – eye-opening ventures; they only allow us to see the plight of the Afghans. Similarly, Madonna’s musical tribute to Malala Yousafzai might be considered solely an auditory venture into Malala’s life. If, instead, we were to physically travel to the Swat Valley in Pakistan, we would be able to hear the constant noises of the artillery fire; meet Malala’s friends and hear their laughter; smell the ‘Gul Makai’ (cornflower) that Malala loved so much that she made it her pseudonym; and feel the wintry air that might make the best of us feel the need to skip class, but did not sway Malala from attending school every day that she could. Living in Malala’s shoes would be a wholesome experience, one involving all five of our senses. How else are we to truly experience the plight of the girls living in the Swat Valley, to truly understand their love for studying and their discouragement at being denied the very thing they love?

As an anthropology student, I came across another striking example. Isolated communities in Tanzania, Africa possess a religious reverence for the small populations of crocodiles that are able to survive the dry, inhospitable conditions of the region. These people perform ritualistic rain dances and conserve what little water they receive only to give most of it away to the crocodiles! Sitting oceans away from these people, such a practice might seem outrageously impractical to us. How will we understand these people and their unusual devotion to these crocodiles? By living and communicating with them, of course. As expected, there are barriers to such understanding. Not all of us possess the means or determination to leave our homes and live with an estranged group of people only to risk being shot or bombed (as in the case of Malala) or see them worship dangerous creatures (as in the case of the Tanzanians). Indeed, we spend much of our time hindered in various ways from coming to a better understanding of people from other cultures. Language, unfortunately, is one of the most significant of these hindrances. This is where the last few words of Høeg’s quote come in – learning the language.

I strongly believe that language, being one of the biggest hindrances, is also the easiest way to understand a culture. Language is an embodiment of the speaker’s culture. Language, of course, is a human creation that people of different cultures hone to suit their needs. For example, Aboriginals in Australia say “Hello” by asking “Which direction are you headed in?” because their sense of cardinal direction is of vital importance to them.2 Similarly, in Turkish, depending on how you acquired the information that you are communicating in your sentence, you would have to use a different verb tense because the reliability of the information is significant to them.3 By learning a language and communicating with other speakers, we can overcome the language barrier and learn so much about

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3 Boroditsky, “Lost in Translation.”
the culture of these people, which is partly what some of us on the Dream Team are doing. Many of us are translating texts from different religions or cultures to acquire a better understanding of those cultures. Why else would Malala’s diary, originally jotted down by her in Urdu, have been translated in English and published on the BBC blog? If her diary had remained in Urdu, none of the non-Urdu speakers in the world would have been able to connect with her story. In fact, Malala’s diary has just recently been translated into Malayalam, a South Indian language, to ensure that Malayalam speakers are also able to read about the seventh-grader’s fight for education, a cause that the Pakistani girls in Swat share with many Indian girls as well.4

Personally, I would want to learn about as many cultures as I can by learning about their languages and their methods of communication. On campus, or within my community, I believe an excellent method of raising awareness of a culture is by holding workshops or making posters and pamphlets about a specific culture every week. During the week, the culture should be promoted and bystanders should be educated about the positive features of that group of people, i.e. their unique abilities and strengths. Perhaps, even promoting foreign films from a specific country or featuring them on campus can foster an entertaining environment while educating others about the culture of that country.

In short, there are many ways of being acquainted with the hidden light of a culture. One of these ways, which Monica Bulaj adopted, was to live with the people of that culture and share her life with them. As this is a difficult task, I believe that another way of doing this is by adopting and learning the language of that culture. Language embodies culture and can provide an insight into the lives and priorities of a set of people. In this way, language can provide the key to unlocking the hidden light of a culture.

Caitlin McKinnon “The Road to Empathy”

Although rooted in genuine sympathy, the expressions of support and condemnation we extend towards Malala and her people do not reflect cultural understanding; while we recognize the actions taken against Malala as ‘unjust’ (because they contradict the Western values we have been conditioned to hold) and offer our condemnation as a response/objection to this violation of Western ‘justice,’ we fall short of true empathy because our lack of comparable experience prevents us from fully identifying with Malala’s feelings, situation and motives.

Each of us views the world from a specific cultural ‘lens’ which ‘tints’ our perception of events, situations, and circumstances. Canadian children, being raised in an environment guaranteeing universal access to education, struggle to conceive of education as only a tentative right, while Malala and her people, lacking guaranteed access to education, fail to fully identify with the educational privileges that Canadian children grow up with. While Canadians can certainly appreciate Malala’s indignation, vulnerability, and strength as she struggles to regain her right to education (we would undoubtedly be enraged if such rights were wrested from us), we fail almost entirely to appreciate the political and cultural conflict from which her violence-ridden struggle derives.

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Although we recognize fragments of ourselves when we gaze into the mirror of other cultures, the image returned is almost always fundamentally distorted – there necessarily exist elements of other cultures with which we fail to fully understand or identify. Dr. Stella Ting-Toomey, a Professor, of Human Communication Studies at California State University at Fullerton, terms these barriers to intercultural understanding “cognitive constraints,” and explains them as culturally-ingrained, experiential “frames of reference... that provide a backdrop that all new information is compared to or inserted into.” These frames of reference include both inborn “primary dimensions” (like gender, age, and social class), which exert an early and ongoing impact on our lives, and mutable “secondary dimensions” (like educational level, income, and work experience), which we “acquire, discard, and/or modify throughout our lives.” Our challenge as members of a global community, then, is to foster intercultural literacy by acknowledging and understanding the numerous dimensions of cultural identity.

By recognizing both the differences (i.e. values, language, customs etc.) and similarities (i.e. fundamental human emotions, needs, desires etc.) that exist between modern cultures, we can bridge the gaps in cultural understanding that prevent us from moving beyond expressions of sympathy to true empathy. We must trade the imagined ‘distance’ between ourselves and others for ‘proximity’ and intimacy by acknowledging the universality of certain fundamentally human experiences; we must create a dialogue between the farthest corners of the world. Monika Bulaj’s photography is one example of such a dialogue: film, by inviting us into the subject’s mind, proves a universally accessible medium capable of encapsulating uniquely human experiences in a single frame. A photograph can instantly communicate experiences that cultures collectively share – from gathering a small sibling into our arms, to bursting into laughter with a best friend, to privately bemoaning yet another chore assigned us. I speak from personal experience when I suggest that sharing these sorts of universal everyday experiences with members of other cultures – either in the real world, or vicariously through mediums such as film and diary – is essential to building intercultural literacy. I spent the first 19 years of my life in almost entirely Caucasian communities; and while my teachers preached the importance of intercultural literacy in an increasingly global community, I never understood what multiculturalism actually looked like because I had few opportunities to interact with anyone from a different background.

I’ve only been in Toronto a few months and my experience with other cultures is very limited, but even what little exposure to other cultures I’ve gained here has developed my intercultural literacy far beyond the theories of global understanding I’d been taught in school. The classmates from Britain, Nigeria, and Burundi with whom I sit through lectures, or the friends from Tibet, Iran, and Lebanon with whom I hunt bargains at the Eaton Centre, or the kids from Azerbaijan, Japan, and Germany with whom I grab lunch, have imparted far more knowledge of their cultures, values, and lifestyles than any article I’ve ever Googled. I hope to continue learning from them (and other students with backgrounds that differ from my own) and I hope they’ll learn something from me as we collectively navigate our lives and our degrees. The more people we encounter who – on a superficial level – appear vastly different from us (but who ultimately prove fundamentally similar), the less we are shocked or overwhelmed by cultural differences and the more we realize the potential for heightened intercultural understanding. It is imperative that we resist assigning our contemporaries to the traditionally static, limiting categories of
“us” versus “them” and instead adopt more flexible perspectives; to succeed in a global environment, we must demand of ourselves a genuine effort to understand one another as unique, but familiar, human beings. If a lack of common experience and personal insight/intimacy is what bars us from understanding cultures like Malala’s, then certainly we can improve our intercultural literacy by open-mindedly engaging in meaningful dialogue with members of foreign or unfamiliar cultures.