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Incorporating multicultural literature in English language teaching curriculum

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine the ways of incorporating multicultural literary texts in English language teaching curriculum to meet the needs of culturally diverse students. Teachers mainly use traditional reading strategies, therefore, they are not aware of, for example, Eurocentric biases which can be examined only by using postcolonial literary criticism. As a result, these teachers are not able to encourage their students to admit uncritically challenging representations of various cultural groups as they encounter these representations in their literary texts. Thus, teachers by using the postcolonial literary theory will lead their students to understand more effectively the representations of dominant and subaltern cultures to be found in both Eurocentric and postcolonial literary texts, and will achieve higher levels of multicultural literacy, which makes them more effective intercultural communicators.

Keywords: Multicultural literature; English language teaching curriculum; postcolonial literature.

1. Introduction

In recent years, English Language Teachers have been developing multicultural literature curriculum to meet the needs of their culturally diverse students and enhance their multicultural literacy. According to Cai (2002) the main goals for incorporating and using multicultural literature in the curriculum are “to challenge the dominant ideologies, affirm the values and experiences of historically underrepresented cultures, foster acceptance and appreciation of cultural diversity, develop sensitivity to social inequalities, and encourage transformation of the self and society” (p. 134).

In order to teach multicultural literature in English language classes, teachers should have enough knowledge about literary theories, especially in terms of reading techniques. Although they use traditional, new criticism, mythological and archetypal, the formalist, feminist, or reader-response approaches of literary analysis in their reading of multicultural literature but they are not aware of, for example, Eurocentric biases which can be interpreted only by using postcolonial criticism. The lack of knowledge about the theoretical perspectives among teachers of English can direct them to force their students to learn problematic representations of various cultural groups uncritically as they come across these representations in literary works they read.

Therefore, the use of postcolonial literary theory in interpreting multicultural text will encourage students to problematize Eurocentric representations of imperialism’s others. Mingshui Cai (2002) also believes that we have to move from informing to empowering when we deal with multicultural literature. He states that “when using multicultural literature in the curriculum, it is

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imperative to move from informing to empowering students. To empower students is to help them develop the ability to identify, critically analyze, and even take action to solve problems related to cultural differences.” (p. xviii)

Thus, moving from informing to empowering will encourage students to respond to the ambiguities of multicultural literature and in order to help them understand what, for example, postcolonial literary theory is, it may be helpful to clarify the relationship between postcolonial and multicultural literatures. There is a close affiliation between ‘postcolonial literature’ and ‘multicultural literature’, but they are not almost synonymous (exactly synonymous). While multicultural literature encompasses world literatures (either translated into or originally written in English) such as immigrant literature, ethnic (or minority) literature, and Native literature, postcolonial literature is defined more narrowly by Ashcroft et al., (1989) as “writing by those peoples formerly colonized by Britain, though much of what it deals with is of interest and relevance to countries colonized by other European powers, such as France, Portugal, and Spain” (p.1). For Mingshui Cai (2002) in order to introduce postcolonial literature into the classroom teachers

Need to study it first. Before teaching a piece of multicultural literature, Willis and Palmer (1998) suggest that teachers do some research into it: They should compile a biographical sketch of the author, a historical review of the setting, a historical review of the period in which the author wrote, and a listing of cultural footnotes to enhance an understanding of the novel. [The research would give teachers and their students] a better understanding of the culture under study. (p.148)

Nevertheless, gaining knowledge of other cultures is only the first step. Teachers in learning to teach multicultural literature should also move from informing to empowering themselves. Teachers should first empower themselves in order to help their students explore, and perhaps transform their cultural perspectives. Teachers should go ‘through the same journey of introspection of self and exploration of other voices that they are expected to lead their students through’ quoted in Cai (2002, p.148). Mingshui Cai (2002) also points out that “Studies have shown that if teachers are not informed and empowered, multicultural literature ‘runs the risk of being trivialized and misused’ Fang, et al., (1999, p. 259). Instead of promoting understanding of the ‘self’ and ‘other,’ it may reinforce misconceptions, stereotypes, and prejudices.” (p. 149)

1. A Controversy on Multicultural Texts

Although postcolonial refers to a historical period following colonial rule in places such as India, Africa, Australia, and Canada and other places in the world, it is used as a method of literary analysis which is known as “the new cross-cultural criticism which has emerged in recent years” Ashcroft et al., (1989, p. 2). Some of the theorists of postcolonial theory define the term as a new way of investigating themes such as cultural dislocation, racism, identity formation, etc., through comparing experiences across dominant and subaltern cultural groups. However, the definitions of Postcolonial Literature are varied. While, the writers of The Empire Writes Back use the term postcolonial to “cover all culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” Ashcroft, et. al., (1989, p. 2), Elleke Boehmer in his Colonial and Postcolonial Literature distinguishes post colonialist literature as being literature “which critically scrutinizes the colonial relationship. It is writing that sets out in one way or another to resist colonialist perspectives” Boehmer (1995, p. 3). The multicultural literature courses in English language and literature departments encompass literary texts written by the authors from different countries around the globe. These kinds of literary texts written by these writers consist of various themes such as intercultural conflicts, displacement, syncretistic, ethnographic detail, intersexuality, authenticity, cultural heterogeneity, and linguistic variance and many other cultural issues around the postcolonial world. These literary texts which discuss many different issues of East-West cultural issues can be studied and examined very efficiently in postcolonial terms when we incorporate them in multicultural literature curriculum of Teaching English Language Departments in undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Thus, postcolonial literary theory gives students the device they need in order to examine the cultural dilemmas of different postcolonial texts. Students who use postcolonial reading strategies achieve higher levels of multicultural literacy by performing more sophisticated and complex interpretations of their texts than they might have done using traditional interpretative approaches. The students’ use of postcolonial reading strategies can also help them to become more effective intercultural communicators.

When we expose students to multicultural literary texts, we will encourage them to gain a literacy to compare and analyze the cultural viewpoints and values of East and West and this knowledge will improve their attitudes towards the necessity of learning foreign languages. When students examine the themes of a multicultural novel or short story, they can connect the various conflicts and cultural issues which took place between the discourses within a text to the similar conflicts in other pertinent fiction, newspapers, historical texts, and other nonfictional literary texts. Therefore, the texts used in these courses are no longer seen as a work of literary text to be valued only in aesthetic terms, but as a compilation of opposing discourses which are related to conflicts that expand well outside the boundaries of a normal text. Edward Said states how important it is the study of literature is that a theory which accounts, on the one hand, for the ways cultural representations are affected by imperialism and, on the other, for the ways imperialist nations depend upon narratives of empire for much of their control over colonial lands and subjects. Said clarifies that the literary texts of empire and its Others are “a specific set of rich cultural documents in which the interaction between [Western countries] on the one hand and the imperialized world on the other is animated, informed, made explicit as an experience for both sides of the encounter” Said (1993, p. 20).

Students can fill the gap that exists within literary texts created within literary works by the exclusion or silencing of certain relevant discourses using proper supplementary materials, so that they can extend their discussions of themes and conflicts in the directions which they believe to be significant. For instance, racism as a significant theme of multicultural literature can be
examined since this theme is of central importance to the postcolonial conception of the multicultural literature curriculum. Thus, students being exposed to this kind of texts will have the opportunity to discuss the concept of race if they are to learn how to deconstruct racist discourse. The term ‘race’ because of Eurocentrism, until recent times, has traditionally been used to exclude non-European literature from the canon of literary works valuable to be studied in the English curriculum. As Henry Louis Gates (1985) states “the question of the place of texts written by the Other (be that odd metaphorical negation of the European defined as African, Arabic, Chinese, Latin American, Yiddish, or female authors) in the proper study of “literature,” “Western literature,” or “comparative literature” has, until recently, remained an unasked question, suspended or silenced by a discourse in which the canonical and the no canonical stand as the ultimate opposition. In much of the thinking about the proper study of literature in this century, race has been an invisible quantity, a persistent yet implicit presence.” (p. 2)

Thus, as Henry Louis Gates (1992), as a curriculum theorist, points out that the problem of racism in education, is crucial for teachers to “demonstrate that the views we hold about race have different historical and ideological weight, forged in asymmetrical relations of power, and that they always embody interests that shape social practices in particular ways” (p. 138).

Teachers and students familiarizing with the postcolonial deconstructive reading strategies will be able to question ethical beliefs and ethnocentric biases in their texts they discuss in their courses and in their interactions with the world outside the courses. Postcolonial deconstructive reading strategies can help students to learn to deconstruct the discourse of race through their reading of multicultural texts which examines dominant and subaltern cultures from both the center and the margins. Naming this ‘textual power’ Robert Scholes maintains that textual activities can be divided into reading, interpretation, and criticism:

In reading we produce text within text; in interpreting we produce text upon text; and in criticizing we produce text against text. As teachers of literary texts we have two major responsibilities. One is to devise ways for our students to perform these productive activities as fruitfully as possible: to produce oral and written texts themselves in all three of these modes of textualization: within, upon, and against. Our other responsibility is to assist students in perceiving the potent aura of codification that surrounds every verbal text. Our job is not to produce ‘readings’ for our students but to give them the tools for producing their own. Scholes (1985, p. 24)

The knowledge the students gain toward textual boundaries will lead them to deal with dominant and subordinate texts from different viewpoints. According to Henry A. Giroux (1992)

In addition to reading different texts and refiguring the grounds on which knowledge is produced, border pedagogy takes up the important tasks of establishing conditions for dominant and subordinate texts to be read differently. Texts must be decentered and understood as historical and social constructions marked by the weight of a range of inherited and specified readings. Hence texts can be read by focusing on how different audiences might respond to them, thus highlighting the possibilities of reading against, within, and outside their established boundaries. (p. 30).

Thus, taking into account these circumstances, there will be no eventually authoritative analysis of a text, but many conflicting and contradictory readings. The reading patterns introduced, here, by Scholes and Giroux, students will enjoy the activities of identifying with, playing with, and fighting with the discourses while they examine different kinds of literary texts. Therefore, students’ involvements with issues such as racism will also be concluded by their teachers as ideological orientation toward multicultural education policies and practices.

One of the first postcolonial studies to depict how Western discourse has constructed the idea of the ‘Oriental’ as inferior is Edward Said’s controversial book Orientals (1978). European and North American scholars, for centuries, have written government and newspaper reports, novels and short stories, translations of Oriental fiction, linguistic, historical, religious, philosophical, anthropological and geographical studies about Middle and Far Eastern cultures. Edward Said (1987) interpreting and deconstructing the underlying of this enormous body of scholarship created by these Orientalists states that

Texts can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe. In time such knowledge and reality produce a tradition, or what Michel Foucault calls a discourse, whose material presence or weight, not the originality of a given author is really responsible for the texts produced out of it (p. 94).

As Said (1987) maintains, the Orientalists’ approach in general shares “with magic and with mythology the self-containing, self-reinforcing character of a closed system, in which objects are what they are because they are what they are, for once, for all time, for ontological reasons that no empirical material can either dislodge or alter” (p. 94).

Western readers desire to read novels in which the protagonist, the narrator and some of the other characters as well are Western. Other characters also often play useful roles in such fiction as intermediaries between East and West. Therefore, by deconstructing such Orientalist stereotypes, students can come to see how literary representations of the Other have offered Western writers with opportunities to misrepresent the majority of the world’s population as deceitful, dangerous, and inhuman. Thus, in deconstructing literary representations of place, students can search for pervasive gaps which exist in multicultural texts. Ashcroft et. al., (1989) argue that:

The gap which opens between the experience of a place and the language available to describe it forms a classic and all pervasive feature of postcolonial texts. This gap occurs for those whose language seems inadequate to describe a new place, for those whose language is systematically destroyed by enslavement, and for those whose language has been rendered unprivileged by the imposition of the language of a colonizing power. (p. 9).

This gap in postcolonial texts is related to the crisis of identity which grows between self and place as a result of the conditions of imperial oppression. For example, since slaves were segregated from their families and from others who spoke their language, and then enforced to speak English in order to continue to exist, the new Englishes such as Creole which they
developed did not adequately unite them with their African past or with the strange new land which they came to live in. Following crossing the Atlantic to work on plantations, slaves required to practice Christianity, and deprived of opportunities to enjoy the power and status that could only be attained by those with full membership within the dominant white society, they lost their feelings of relationship to their homeland and could only express their relationship to their masters’ world through their masters’ language.

Postcolonial theorists are using many critical models with the aim of categorizing and enlightening the association between literary works and the places which they are trying to represent. Bill Ashcroft and his colleagues have acknowledged four such models: First, ‘national’ or regional models, which emphasize the distinctive features of the particular national or regional culture; second, race-based models which identify certain shared characteristics across various national literatures, such as the common racial inheritance in literatures of the African diasporas addressed by the ‘Black writing’ model; third, comparative models of varying complexity which seek to account for particular linguistic, historical, and cultural features across two or more postcolonial literatures; fourth, more comprehensive comparative models which argue for features such as hybridity and syncreticity as constitutive elements of postcolonial literatures (syncretism is the process by which previously distinct linguistic categories, and, by extension, cultural formations, merge into a single new form). Ashcroft (1989, p.15).

Whether students use these models in their analyses or not, the postcolonial theory of representation obliges students to include the different values systems that have shaped the constructions of people and places to be found in their texts. As Henry A. Giroux (1992) highlights:

[Representations] are always produced within cultural limits and theoretical borders, and as such are necessarily implicated in particular economies of truth, value, and power. In relation to these larger axes of power in which all representations are embedded, it is necessary to remind the student: Whose interests are being served by the representations in question? Within a given set of representations, who speaks, for whom, and under what conditions? Where can we situate such representations ethically and politically with respect to questions of social justice and human freedom? What moral, ethical, and ideological principles structure our reactions to such representations? (p. 219)

Thus, postcolonial deconstructions of literary representation of place can encourage students to enlarge the limits of their imaginations and to encounter the stereotypical simplifications and exaggerations which writers sometimes use in the construction of fictive worlds. Students and teachers can argue and interrogate the representation of place in their responses to multicultural literature by using these models of the types of postcolonial literature and different senses of place. Comparing the representation of the same place by different writers, students will learn how to stay away from thinking about people and their worlds in conventional terms. They will also learn that everybody can just realize a place from her or his prejudiced point of views. Readings of different writers’ descriptions of a place will constitute every student’s perception of a particular place.

Thus, multicultural literature can provide students a sense of place for the countries from which the texts develop, therefore, the authors could represent to students in words a place’s basic presence or reality. In other words, their writing cannot be a clear expression of their world. Writers of multicultural fiction are apparently responsive that their works exist in relation to religious and national mythologies, generic conventions, political tropes, and so on. Thus, they can use the rhetorical means of their skill to reinforce main cultural discourse or to take apart it.

Thus, Achebe using the English language, attempted to include his Igbo culture and tradition into the dominant white colonial discourse to change the direction of the biased colonial discourse. Postcolonial writers by their oppositional supplementation are consciously subverting the dominant culture’s discourse through oppositional supplementation, as Achebe does, are representing the subaltern negatively to validate the dominant group’s authority, the act of representation is problematic for postcolonial critics and, therefore, a potentially useful starting point for students’ critical analyses of multicultural literature.

Student, deconstructing and reconstructing a sense of place, examine it not only as the object of study but question it as the problematic challenges of the writer to capture that place in the web of intertextuality which should be of concern in the multicultural literature class. This network of intertextuality is not only a literary innovation; rather, it involves all types of texts, including the political, religious, economic, and social. Effective postcolonial teaching of multicultural literature, as Gayatri Spivak (1985) states: “should slide without a sense of rupture into an active and involved reading of the social text within which the student and teacher of literature are caught” (p. 34).

By studying and examining multicultural literature, students, instead of focusing on just classic and modern works of the Western literary tradition, are encouraged to deconstruct perceptions of cultural difference which they come across in their texts. Reading texts according to the postcolonial theory enable students to examine literary representations from multiple perspectives. For Roger Simon (1992) young readers need to be given opportunities to “shift the grounds of [their] own readings” (p. 114).

The main purpose of textual study should be self-referential, that is, through a study of one’s responses to text, one can be assisted to situate oneself (one’s perceptions, beliefs, desires) within the ‘worldly’ discourses that make up a person’s way of being in the world. This attempt, as part of a pedagogical project, will help students to come to a better perception of who they are, how their history has been comprised and how this knowledge can open up possibilities for change and enhancement, not only of their own lives but the lives of others as well (Simon, 1992, pp. 114-115). For example, student by examining the The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy and Things Fall Apart can achieve an appreciation of the different ways in which Indian and Nigerian people are portrayed by each writer. The comparative analyses which students carry out in their course between the representations of Indian and Africans which they learn in the works of Eurocentric and postcolonial writers, help them to attain an ability in their understanding of the differences between the writings, for instance, of the tourist, Ernest Hemingway, and the
resistance writer, Chinua Achebe, which they could not have achieved without postcolonial approach to the development of multicultural literacy.

2. Conclusion

On the whole, the students’ exposure to a basic postcolonial theory of representation offers them a broader base of reading strategies and theoretical insights into the relationship between imperialism and culture than they would have had access to have while they examining multicultural texts using only traditional literary critical reading strategies. This newly acquired skill will enable students not only to compare and contrast Eurocentric and postcolonial representations of dominant and subaltern cultures, but also will enhance their personal engagement with the moral, political, religious, and economic issues raised in the various discourses of their multicultural texts as they evaluate their own cultural assumptions in relation to those which they come across during their studies.

Thus, the incorporation of multicultural literary text in ELT curriculum will introduce students to an exciting and challenging range of world literature, particularly, postcolonial literatures in English, with a particular emphasis on works associated with Africa, India, Pakistan and Britain. Using these texts in some courses of ELT departments will help students develop a critical understanding of literary variations. These texts both established and less known authors in the field will introduce students to the variety of critical issues and debates within the field of postcolonial studies, focusing in particular on key issues such as migration, racism, colonial discourse, identity, cultural hybridity and gender politics. The focus can be on key themes: representations and resistance of national identities, language, migrant aesthetics, and gender politics, in a postcolonial context. During these courses, students will explore political, cultural and formal issues through reading the postcolonial novels.

These courses also give students a substantial introduction to non-canonical texts and the relationship of culture, politics and history to the study of literature. Students who complete these courses will be able to

1. Demonstrate critical awareness of a range of literatures in English, dominants and subaltern literatures and of regional and global varieties of the English language;
2. Understand the role of different critical traditions in shaping literary history;
3. Gain competence to evaluate the literary, cultural and socio-historical contexts of literary creation and reception;
4. Provide an understanding of a wide range of colonial and post-independence literatures and their social and cultural contexts;
5. Pay particular attention to the marginalizing of the colonial world in the ‘classical’ imperial novel, and its repossession in post-colonial writing;
6. Understand the issues of women and post colonialism, transgressive writing, and the sites of colonization and their relationship to the metropolis;
7. Develop a critical awareness of the wide-ranging impacts of colonialism and how these have been treated in various periods in different types of text;
8. Acknowledge a broader appreciation of nonstandard varieties of English and other world varieties of English;
9. Recognize an awareness of issues related to World English’s and to the sociopolitics of English language teaching;

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