

Studying Multiculturalism through Readings of Diasporic Writing: Indonesian Way of Learning Differences and Diversity

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Abstract

Literary writings of diaspora writers have flourished in the bookshelves to give not only diversity to the world literature but also to make us aware that there are 'other people' in the neighbourhood. Apparently, diasporic writers have a special way of looking of their worlds due to their privilege although they claim it as causing the feeling of being in exile or rootless. Multiculturalism is a reality in Indonesia. A country blessed with rich cultures, the possibility of people meeting with those of different cultural backgrounds is huge and intercultural that it has to be promoted constantly to help people understand accept the richness with differences and various cultures it has. Like the places where diasporic writers who write multicultural themes feel alienated sometimes minorities feel the same when dealing with their surroundings. Multicultural writers have brought with themselves certain points of views in the literature they write. Therefore, adding multicultural literary contents into the Indonesian classrooms will give benefits to the readers to learn to accept multiculturalism from the experience of others. In discussing this topic, the writer will also use examples from multicultural literary writings.

Keywords: *diaspora, diasporic writings, multiculturalism, multicultural competency, Indonesia*

Introduction

Diaspora literature have attracted readers' attention because of the uniqueness it brings, whether through the themes, the setting and most importantly the culture it brings or the various cultures it blends in one story. "Diaspora" comes from the Greek word which means "scattering" and it refers to the dispersion of a people from their homeland, in the biblical term, It is originally used for the Jew living in exile, externment from their homeland. The term now is used to refer to those who are not living in their homelands for many reasons, either politics, economy or other reasons. Their being not in their homelands has made them created a new literature that we call diaspora literature.

Indonesia, being a multicultural country, faces differences in almost every aspect of life. This however, has not been realized by many if not ignored. We, as the citizen of this country, have faced difficulty in accepting others who are not of same background. Considering the richness of many cultures and differences, we must expose the students to the beauty of differences as much as we can in order to maintain the oneness of Indonesia as a country.

The idea of writing this paper is to give readers an insight that accepting multiculturalism is some kind of a competency that can be trained in schools, through selection of readings, for example, so that through this reading materials, students can develop their multiculturalism competency which will help them in becoming a responsible citizen who are capable of accepting differences around. This paper also provides readers with examples of diaspora writings. The selection for the examples for this paper is not particular, only to give a picture of how diaspora writings do help students realize the differences around to be appreciated, kept and maintained.

Multiculturalism in diasporic writing

Pluralism, diversity or multiculturalism is a daily fact in many parts of the world. It describe a situation where communities consist of cultural or ethnic diversity. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) defines multiculturalism as "the co-existence of diverse cultures, where culture includes racial, religious, or cultural groups and is manifested in customary behaviours, cultural assumptions and values, patterns of thinking, and communicative styles." (<https://www.ifla.org/publications/defining-multiculturalism>). In fact it is actually difficult to find a country which consists of only one race or culture. African and Asian countries are top in the list of the most multicultural countries since they consist of many ethnic or tribal groups, thus many cultural diversity. The United States, Australia and Canada are also considered multicultural countries because they are home to immigrants coming from many countries and form their ethnicity in the new lands.

Diasporic literature is a term referring to the works of immigrants who have acquired a new citizenship but maintain their cultures (to a certain extent) in the foreign land and perhaps still have memories of their homelands. Their writings are most of the time based on their experience living in the foreign land, far from their homelands. The salient characteristic of diasporic literature is explained as follow:

...that it is not based on any theory or philosophy but on the life experiences of the immigrants. It creates an emotional haven to its diaspora by discussing their own physical and emotional conflicts. Diasporic literature focuses mainly on themes like discrimination, cultural shock and reverse cultural

shock, problems in adjustment and assimilation, orientalism, identity crisis, alienation and displacement, dilemma, depression, hybridity and generational gap (Hirimitughoda, --)

Diasporic writings have existed long. They have attracted readers because of the uniqueness it brings in all elements. The setting for example. The readers of Indian diaspora writings will sense Indian elements in their US-setting because they will insert their cultures, traditions or even values into the stories, making them colourful as their sarees and ornaments. It is the multicultural aspects that readers identify when reading diaspora writings. Diaspora writers scatter around the world and their literatures have flourished in the bookshelves. The selection of books are vary and it is up to us to decide what book to pick and adjust it to our situations. For the purpose of writing this paper, however, only literature of diaspora writers in the United States are discussed. In the US diasporic writers deal with displacement or alienation due to the people's nostalgia of their homeland or their search of identity.

One of the first most attracting diaspora writings is *The Godfather*, a crime novel by Italian American writer, Mario Puzo, which was published in 1969. The beginning of flourishing diaspora writings. The novel tells about the life of a fictional mafia family in New York City in the 1940es, headed by Vito Corleone, also known as Don Corleone. The novel was on *The New York Times* Best Seller list for 67 weeks and sold over nine million copies in two years. It hit the Americans with the reality that there were other 'people' who lived in the US, the people or communities who still retain their original traditions, beliefs, and "diasporic social positions that the Corleones find themselves in, infected by feelings of longing, alienation and loss which are never fully comprehensible." The story tells about estrangement of the people from the native land and sometime created a clash of generations because the next generation born and raised in the US "often remake themselves outside their native tradition" (<http://www.highonfilms.com/godfather-paradox-diasporic-dialectics-gender-trouble-issues-identity/>).

From Mario Puzo's *The Godfather*, one by one diaspora writers emerged and were acknowledged. Asian diaspora writers, for example. They came to the surface and published and mesmerised their readers with their charming Asian and Asian-American characters. Their unique experiences as immigrants living in the US again hit readers that there are actually other ethnic groups living in that country; they are not crowding the 'salad bowl' but adding colors and 'flavour' to it. Again the stories they build are based on the writers' experiences as Asians living in 'exile' or in the foreign land. One of the most important and considered the first diaspora writers of Chinese descents is Maxine Hong Kingston. Her collected short stories, entitled *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, published in 1975, came out as the first Chinese diaspora writing in the US. Through her book, Kingston constructs a Chinese diasporic feminist identity via autobiographical, familial, and ethnic collective remembrance. In one of the stories, "White Tigers" is the story of Hong's own childhood fantasy of overcoming feelings of inferiority as a female. Like Fa Mu Lan, she imagines herself leaving home at seven years of age and being brought up by martial arts teachers. She becomes a great warrior, triumphantly returning to her home to save her people. It is indeed interesting how Kingston introduces the Chinese people through their dialects, traditions, and beliefs through her stories of ghosts/superstitions:

They are somewhat superstitious, in that they believe in doctrines called fengsui, which are supposed to help in organization of a home. They also worship through their ancestors, folk heroes, animals, or their representations in idols or images, as if they are gods. To these representations they offer respect and ritual offerings, burning incense, ritual papers, and paper objects to help maintain order and bring good luck. Above all, Chinese respect other people's religions as much as they respect their own
(http://www.oakton.edu/user/4/billtong/chinaclass/History/Chinese_Immigration.htm)

While Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* talks about memories of her past, Amy Tan, a later diaspora writer, portrays the richness of Chinese cultures and tradition through Chinese immigrant families living in the US. She portrays the first Chinese generation in the US who are respectful of their traditions since they were raised with it and trying to retain the (genuine) Chinese culture as much as possible although they realize that they live in a new land. The conflicts start when they try to raise their American born children the way they were raised: full of superstitions and the dos and don'ts. Being Asians, they were, of course, raised with more don'ts than dos. The second generation, however, being exposed to American education and experiences, they perceive their Chinese culture in a different way, i.e. accepting only what is reasonable for them. This creates conflicts between generations. The mother daughter relationship in her two first novels, *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife* explore the conflicts of mothers and their American born daughters.

Both Kingston and Tan successfully show their readers that being immigrants in the US is not easy since they have two responsibilities, i.e. preserving their identity as Chinese and their struggle in accepting and adjusting to their new status as Chinese Americans.

Of the many Indian diaspora writers in the US, Bharati Mukerjee was one of the first. Her stories explore issues amongst Indian communities in the US. Indians are known as one of the nations that emigrate, for a better future, by all means. Those who are financially secured will leave the country for further studies, most preferably pursuing technology; those who are not will seek higher level income so that they can support their families back home. They are lucky because they are competent in English language, the first and foremost condition for those who wish to stay overseas. Now the Indians constitutes a highly collective society in the US.

Following Mukerjee, there are actually many Indian diaspora authors worth discussing. Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, for example. Jhumpa Lahiri, the writer who was born to Indian parents from London settles in the USA. Lahiri's debut is a collection of short stories called *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). *Interpreter of Maladies* is the collected short stories that brings theme about Indian immigrants living in the US.. Eventhough this book's themes revolve around the lives of Indian immigrants, the writer gets a glimpse about the marriage

lives of Indian women and its difficulties because traditional Indian women's lives are different to those of modern Indian women who are busy with their careers and seem disrespectful of their the strict social culture concerning marriages. Traditional women roles that can no longer be accepted by modern Indian women living in the US is the central conflict in the story. Apparently Indian men living in the US expected that Indian wives will still be carrying their traditional roles because of what they were taught. Education and acquaintance with their American counterparts do not always result in reshaping new concept of the roles of Indian wives. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a poet, essayist, author, fiction and short story writer, and book reviewer. Her short story collection, *Arranged Marriage and Other Stories*, brought her the credit of winning the American Book Award in 1995. Her works are largely set in the United States as well as in India. *Arranged Marriage* is a collection of 11 short stories of arranged marriages, from the side of women. Like Lahiri, *Arranged Marriage* talks about Indian-born women settling in the US who try hard to balance between their Indian cultural values with liberal thoughts. It is a conflict between traditional vs. modern thoughts.

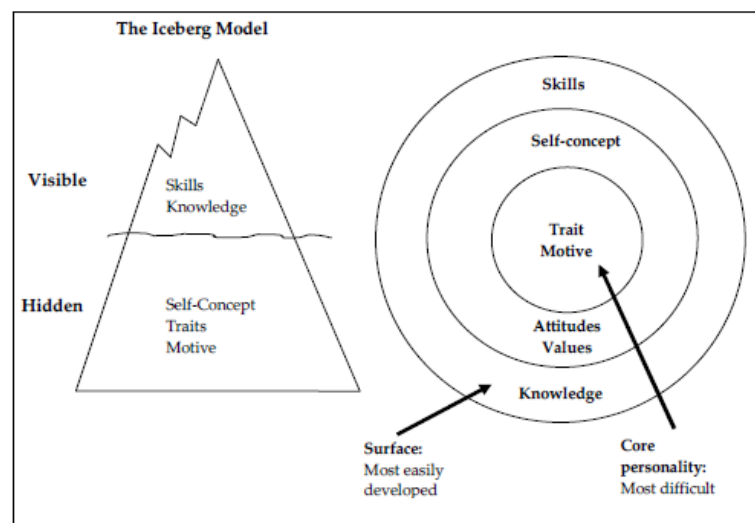
Why multicultural competency is important

It is clear that we are interested in graduating multiculturally competent students who can easily transfer into any kind of work in any kind of cultural settings since the chance of working in multicultural societies/cities is big. Therefore, as much as possible, we have to not only introduce multiculturalism but also train it inside or outside classrooms. According to Pascarella and Terenzini, as quoted by Andersen (2012), diversity experiences give a positive impact on cognitive development in relation to the critical thinking, analytical competencies as well as complex thinking and that the most salient diversity experiences are provided through interactions with culturally diverse peers, in formal programs such as coursework focusing on social-cultural diversity and intergroup relations. So it is our duty to enhance this multicultural competency to our students because competencies are what make people competent.

Competency can be described as knowledge, skills, abilities and personal characteristics and it can be developed through constant trainings to achieve. Transformational linguist Noam Chomsky (1965) who introduced the concept of generative grammar as theory of linguistic competency help us understand the concept of competency. He divides competencies into two: deep and surface structures and it is the deep that dictates the surface. In language, Chomsky further explains that not only that the grammar rules govern the performance but also the way the words are put in a sentence and the meaningfulness of it. Until learners know how to use grammatical resources for sending meaningful messages in real life situations (the competency), they cannot be said to know a language (the performance). It is also essential that they know what varieties of language are used in specific situations. In short, the performance of a language relies on the competency.

Another theory that can help understand the concept of competency is by Spencer and Spencer (1993) that emphasizes five characteristics of competency, i.e. motives, traits, self concept, knowledge, and skills (Figure 1) Those were grouped into two layers of competency: central and surface competencies. While the central is hidden and is considered hard to develop, the surface is visible and most easily developed. The first three-- self concept, trait and motive--are hidden while skill and knowledge are visible and relatively easy to improve through certain trainings. However, the third characteristic, i.e. self-concept, although hidden, can still be developed with more time and difficulties.

Figure 1: Spencer and Spencer's Central and Surface Competencies



Keršien and Savanevicien (2005) in their research on organizational multicultural competency, conclude that the concept of multicultural competency has to be designed in a multicultural environment for international competitiveness and successful operation in multicultural environment. Further, they identify that

...individual multicultural competences as stable competences (abilities: empathy, approval, task performance, openness to experience, and personal characteristic: emotional stability, extraversion,

agreeableness) and dynamic competences (skills: capacity for learning and change, stress-management skills, conflict resolution skills, perceptual questioning skills, crosscultural relationship, and knowledge: language and cultural knowledge). These competences ensure behaviour for a successful cross-cultural adjustment Keršien and Savanevicien (2005: 7).

In conclusion, multiculturalism competency is indeed important, not only for us as members of a multicultural society but also as individual seeking international competition in the growing multicultural organizations.

Developing multiculturalism competencies in Indonesia

Indonesia is country where hundreds of languages are spoken throughout the islands from Weh island in the west to Papua island in the east. There are around 250 ethnic groups in Indonesia, with big ethnic groups in Java, Sumatera island to small ethnic groups consisting not more than one hundred people in Papua island. The people of Indonesia form several religion communities, the largest is muslim community and others form Christian, Catholic, Hinduism, and Buddhism communities; a small communities however still hold to their traditional beliefs.

In everyday's life, the people is used to encounter with differences and diversity because the geographic conditions do not separate people with different cultures. They do live side by side in most parts of the country, especially in big islands of Java, Sumatera, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, or Papua. The country's national motto, "*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*" or Unity in Diversity indicates that the country acknowledges the diversity or the variety of people or the differences in the multicultural society but there is a unity, the oneness that holds all the differences. Historically, *Sumpah Pemuda* or the Youth Pledge was made to remind the youth that Indonesia is one country, one nation and one language. The pledge that reminds us that despite the differences, we are one.

Being one nation, Indonesian people tended to abandon the diversity that forms the country, the complex oneness that consists of multitude of different cultures that make Indonesia so interesting to those who observe Indonesia from afar or those who come for a short visit. Due to many intolerance upheavals lately, Indonesian governments, especially President Joko Widodo, has to work hard to reintroduce the diversity again and again, to boost nationalism through its diversity. For Indonesians, however, the reality of being multicultural has to be informed continuously so that the people will be aware of it and value differences that form the nation.

Actually living in a multicultural country gives one a chance of becoming a person who are capable of communicating with people of different background and sensitive of cultural expressions of others (Kivel, --). Therefore, education be it in primary, secondary or higher education has to include multiculturalism in the curricula. Džalalova and Raud (2012) further say that nowadays multicultural education aims at keeping and developing a whole variety and diversity of cultural values, the situation that we have to keep in harmony:

multicultural education in the situation of cross-cultural interdependence has to support the preservation and development of self-identity, the formation of cross-cultural communication skills, and it has to prevent and resolve successfully all possible conflicts caused by national or other differences between peoples. Multicultural education empowers every person with a wider range of skills in communication and cooperation with other persons. (Trasberg in Džalalova and Raud, 2012: 66-67)

In addition to that, Džalalova and Raud (2012) summed up their research on multicultural competence and its development in students of teachers' education with:

The curricula should be based on the key principles of multicultural education which value humanistic values, positive ethnic self-identity and tolerance, knowledge of cultures and their interconnection, mastery of skills and methods applicable to a multicultural educational environment.

Improving multicultural competencies needs constant efforts, for instance, teachings multiculturalism through diaspora literature discussion. When discussed often, the concept of multiculturalism will eventually be accepted. Many theories proves that competences can be trained depending on the characteristics of competencies (Spencer and Spencer, 1993) and Chomsky further emphasizes that when multicultural competency exists then the performance will be excellent.

Therefore, competencies of multiculturalism has to be trained as early as possible and maintained up to the higher level of education, in the curriculum or as hidden curriculum.

Conclusion

Diasporic literature flourishes and has attracted many readers from around the world due to its uniqueness and different themes it brings. For Indonesia, reading diasporic literature, especially those written by Asian descents help readers not only in increasing their language skills (since they are familiar with the background of the story, thus easily understand it) but also raising their awareness of the diversity they are experiencing as a nation. With around 240 ethnic groups, Indonesian people's competence of multiculturalism has to be nurtured, through trainings or for students of English, through discussing diasporic writings of Asian diaspora writers.

Diasporic writings which contain experiences of immigrants living in foreign land help readers comprehend multiculturalism as a reality. Characters, traditions, setting are easily identified because they are close to us,

Indonesians, who are also rich in cultures and tradition. Identifying diversity is important so that eventually students’ multicultural competency can be achieved. This will become their valuable assets, as members of multicultural society, they are capable of appreciating differences and diversity and as future competent human resource, they are ready for the competitive global labour market.

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