

The Value of Multiculturalism and Language in Children's Literature: A Critical Study

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Abstract

Celebrating language diversity, cultural pluralism, and multiculturalism has long been seen as a sign of cultural openness and awareness in children's literature. Many good examples on cultural pluralism are seen in children's books that celebrate the value of humanity as a universal concept rather than only a representation of national identity. The paper emphasizes the invitation to call upon pluralism as well as the cultural diversity which constitutes a new vision in children's literature. Despite the fact that children's literature has developed over an extended period of time, one has to understand the role that cultural diversity and its representation in children's literature have in developing education and classrooms' curriculum. However, as the paper showed us, multicultural children's literature is still growing as many scholars and writers began to realize the importance of multicultural education in terms of social, ideological, and linguistic aspects.

Keywords: language, diversity, multiculturalism, children's literature, globalization, pluralism

1. Introduction

Children's literature represents an interesting domain for the great role that both language and culture play in enhancing a better understanding about the structure of modern world nowadays. In fact, language, as a major component in children's literature, is a product of culture that cannot be separated from its social and cultural milieu. Therefore, this paper will mainly look at some texts from children's literature that have become highly globalized and internationalized due to their global and universal multicultural treatment of style, language, themes, settings, and notions.

Part of the globalized perspective in children's literature is that it is laden with cultural pluralism which is considered one of the most critical themes in children's literature, especially from a global and modern perspective because it covers a wide range of concepts that not only relate to a specific community, race, or culture, but it rather relates to multifarious aspects in terms of the religious, social, and racial life, in addition to its relation to cultural and moral structure of modernity and globalization today.

Multicultural literature is a good place for students to start looking at cultures and languages from different perspectives as it makes them understand their own cultures and languages much better when they start making comparisons between the ones they read about and the ones they actually belong to. Additionally, children's literature is not restricted to one specific culture; it deals with issues that relate to the internal structure of one's culture as well as other cultures. For example, American children's literature deals with broad multicultural issues that relate to the history of the American culture through showing problems from the past as well as the present that pertain to sexuality, race, blackness and whiteness, and minorities issues, but it also deals with the representations of other cultures. For example, Yang's *American Born Chinese* would be the perfect example here and, probably it might be the perfect novel to start with for children simply because the novel is rich in thematic suggestions that deal with the question of place and identity in a simple and clear style. The novel is easy to read and understand since it is a graphic one. However, novels like Suzak's *Book Thief*, and Greene's *Summer of my German Soldier* are huge and complex multicultural novels because they deal with complicated issues in a highly philosophical and sophisticated language.

Without any doubt, children literature fosters a proper learning of languages and enhances readers with an improved capacity to master new words and vocabulary besides its didactic functions, as Moller and Meyer (1995) claim that "The familiar contexts of the stories allow the readers to make connections between the new information that the text provides and their own background knowledge. The information in the text includes more than just vocabulary, it involves syntax, flow of language, intonation, pronunciation, and genre. A children's story is typically short and can be read in one sitting. The affective domain is involved in the reading of a story, in that the student associates the reading of a story with recollections of the past. The experience of being read to a child and the memory of stories told by family and friends set the stage for the positive involvement of the reader. (p. 34)

Children's literature can be considered an important medium of language communication and learning, thus "using children's literature to teach language is, therefore, rooted in relationships--between the reader and the text. (p.36)

2. Diversity and Multiculturalism in Children's Literature

In addition to the didactic aspects of multicultural children's literature, it always depicts a package of moral, linguistic, and social values. Apart from the classical and traditional stereotypes that multicultural literature used to present for readers as we see in Fairy Tales in the Victorian age, there are many examples from the contemporary multicultural literature where children can feel that they are involved in the texts they read and have the power to reshape their views about the universe as a culture, and more importantly, the societies and families they belong to. New ways to look at multicultural aspects have definitely restructured the way scholars look at children's literature from multiple perspectives. For example, the rise of feminism as Vandergrift (1993) notes that feminism as well as the rise of human rights movement have definitely changed the patterns scholars used to look at in children's literature. (p. 365)

Vandergrift (1993) adds that, "Another issue is that of uniqueness versus universality. In one sense, all literature is accessible to others because it deals, in some way, with the commonality of human experience. It is equally true, however, that each character is a unique being shaped by a myriad of factors, not just by race, color, or ethnicity. In the beginnings of multicultural literature for children in this country, universality and commonality were stressed (p.365)

Vandergrift refers to the well-known American children literature writer, Ann Nolan Clark, who wrote several bilingual children books. Such works by Clark have contributed much in promoting cultural values and global multiculturalism through the power of language itself, " Clark's first books for children were bilingual textbooks written for the children she taught for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. In *My Mother's House* (1941) was written with and for five Tewa children in the Tesuque Pueblo in Santa Fe and was first called *Home Geography* because that is what it was. Both the author and the children she taught were dissatisfied with the textbooks available to them. Most were alien to their ways, and even the stories of their people were told from a white perspective, explaining what was already known, and often best left unsaid, to Native American youngsters. The Director of Indian Education, Willard Beatty, was so impressed with *Home Geography* that he sent it to children's book editor May Masee who saw its appeal for a larger audience and published it as *In My Mother's House*. (p.370)

According to Vandergrift, despite the huge multifarious complexities in terms of content and ideas, Clark's Novel, *In My Mother's House* (1941) has a logical and accessible sense of linguistic simplicity that can easily attract new readers, " *In My Mother's House* has a rhythmic simplicity and a sensitivity to the details of the everyday life of the Pueblo people. Its cadence, reflecting the speech patterns of these Native Americans, and its short sentences made it an ideal reader, and its gentle reverence for their way of life made it an ideal introduction to that life for others. The poetic beauty of this work cries out to be read aloud. (p. 370)

Recent transformations and technologies have definitely changed the landscape of Children's literature. There have been tremendous shifts in the way children literature represents the construction of childhood in terms of its active role in real life socially, psychologically, and culturally. As Vandergrift continues to note in the same article that the last decade in the twentieth century has witnessed several developments in the structure of children's literature:

In this the last decade of the twentieth century, more and more young people can find reflections of themselves and their own cultures in the literature published for them. It is difficult to gain perspective on a particular time while living through it, but one hopes that history will prove that children's literature has finally reached at least McIntosh's fourth phase in which the stories of many people's are told in a nonhierarchical tapestry of human lives. There is, nonetheless, still much to be accomplished before we reach her fifth phase in which all peoples are fully included, and the differences within cultures, as well as those among cultures, are available to readers both inside and outside those cultures. As we look from the past to current and future trends in the history of multicultural literature

for children and young people, the feminist perspective remains at least one useful lens with which to examine these works. (p.374)

One of the most important things about multicultural children's literature is its ability to depict the characters' new visions and dreams about life, existence, and culture, especially when readers imagine these dreams; they began to understand how other children of different cultures have the same dreams, the same ambitions simply because they are human beings. The psychological influence that multicultural literature has on readers is definitely powerful and effective simply because many novels leave the readers with an open space to think about the self and the other. For example, Terry Pratchett's *Nation*, leaves readers with a huge space to think about the ontological experience of existence as well as themes like the self-vs. Other. Such kind of huge philosophical multicultural literature will allow them to see how 'humanity' is the same when they feel it within. It also gives them the chance to criticize the texts they read from their own perspectives while they can still learn how it is inappropriate to judge other cultures in terms of one's own cultural perspectives. Thus, Children's literature broadens the readers' minds about other cultures and prepare them to better understand the profound cultural knowledge one is supposed to have. It is worth mentioning here that cultural awareness and openness do not come from the shallow commercial popular culture, rather learners can better absorb the deep meaning of other cultures through written literature that take them away to the realm of true meaning of what culture can represent.

In fact, children's literature has always dealt with this complicated issue through its rich representation of characters and its depiction of race and religion along with other thematic suggestions that all relate to cultural pluralism. However, the treatment of cultural pluralism in children's literature is a highly complicated issue for many reasons. First of all, the way children's literature depicts cultural pluralism might not look exactly the same. Throughout some of the critical articles we have read, we found out that children's literature does not necessarily represent the true image about a certain culture. It is critical to note that a shallow and superficial experience of a certain culture would lead to misconceptions or stereotypes about a certain culture. It is the lack of the actual experience the authors have about a certain culture which leads to misconceptions. In fact, this is a real serious issue simply because it could seriously lead to misconception, contradictions, or distortions about a certain culture. We have to bear in mind here that children's books are directly intended for children, and probably they will be vulnerable to these misconceptions unless they are introduced carefully to the culture the novels or the books talk about. In fact, children's literature is as important as the way it represents different cultures and different judgments about any culture. While this can be a very sensitive and complicated issue, fortunately, the scholarship on this issue is overwhelmingly impressive and that the awareness some scholars have about this issue produces fruitful outcomes as they help clear up points of conflicts related to this issue. In fact, one of the difficult things is the way children might be impacted by the representations of cultural pluralism in children's literature. It is really important here to point out the importance of evaluating the social and the psychological influence that children's literature has on children. This is only achievable when we compare their responses on different novels that represent the same culture.

While children's literature stimulates huge but ambivalent responses from children, yet they will all be impacted by these representations, especially when reading some of the most influential and powerful novels, like *Mexican white Boy*, *Nation*, *Summer of my German Soldier*, *Monster*...etc. Such kinds of novels are not easy to deal with, and probably much of the responsibility lies on the teachers and the way they choose to teach these texts to children. Probably, the complexity of teaching such novels not only resides within the boundaries of the text or the imaginative world of the author, rather the complexity lies in the readers' world. Questions, like "whom" and "how" and "why" children will read literature might be of great significance. What also increases the complexity of teaching multicultural children's literature is the anticipations and assumptions children might come up with when reading it, and the lack of background they actually have about the cultures they read in different books or novels. The big question that may arise here is, "how to teach multicultural literature for children? And, are the students culturally prepared to know and understand other cultures? While we think that teaching multicultural literature can just bridge the gaps between generations and cultures, children might not be able to understand the huge psychological and social complexity in many multicultural novels. Since children's literature is a rich ground for overlapped and complicated issues like religion, color, race, it is, therefore, a complicated genre that might really create big challenges and difficulties before young adults. Undoubtedly, teaching multicultural children's literature will definitely enhance children's understanding of cultures as they begin to see and understand cultures other than their own, and also help promote the respect and love of other cultures, still there is a big need to make students prepared before they read a multicultural novel.

Cultural pluralism and multiculturalism entail a sophisticated controversy on how to define multiculturalism in
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children's literature. This is quite obvious when we think of globalization of literature, especially in post modern times. Gliton (2005) refers to this controversy when she notes, "the meaning of the term multicultural has generated much controversy because of the ongoing debate over who is included under the umbrella part of the term, multi." (p.2) This is true and practical because the fluid nature of the definition gives scholars, writers and critics the space to define multiculturalism according to their views about the problem they deal with. Multiculturalism could include race, religion, culture, whiteness, blackness, outsiders..etc. it is from Gilton's perspective that the term multiculturalism "can encompass people from all ethnic groups and minorities." (p.3)

3. Selected Works from Children's Literature: A Global Perspective on the Dilemma of Children's Literature

AlHazza and Lucking (2007) argue that teaching multicultural children's literature, especially literature that talks about Arab culture will help change the negative stereotypical notions that the west have about the Arab people as being uneducated, terrorists or extremists. The authors, in fact, stress the need for children to study some Arab literature that could give a nice real image about their culture, which, in turn could lessen the negative conceptions many people have about Arabs, especially after the 9/11 which seriously created a huge gap between the west and the middle east, or the orient in general. (p.133). As these authors point out the basic reason behind this misconception is the media and the pop-culture that actually escalate the negative view about Arabs and Muslims in general, including the Arab Americans who live in the united states as a minority. They point out that there is a huge interesting Arab children's literature that American children can read and enjoy and, probably change the way they look at Arab children, like the *Golden Sandal*, *Sindbad: From the Tales of Thousands and One Night*, and the *Story Teller*. They explain that that Arab children's literature is rich because it covers a wide range of traditional, historical, contemporary, and modern literature which are all helpful to replace the negatives misconceptions with good real ones.(p.134)

Rudine Bishop (1995) talks about major important books that celebrate multiculturalism in the United States. The first one is *Celebrate America*, which mainly represents America as a "melting pot" as it praises unity, harmony and plurality as the most essential factors in the multicultural structure of the American nation that consists of a blend of races including Africans, Americans, Asians, Europeans, Latinos, and Native Americans. The second one as the writer explains is *My Kingdom: Hispanic American Literature and the Art for Young People* which was edited by Charles Sullivan, tackles issues like diversity and the question of human identity. The last one is *Cool Salsa: Bilingual Poems in Growing up Latinos in the US*, which was written in English and translated to Spanish, focuses on the importance of family and culture values. The last one is Fernando Peco's Picture book; *The Red Comb* discusses the "complex interrelationships among people living in the Americas". (p. 316-318)

Joseph Bruchac (1995) tackles the issue of multiculturalism and cultural pluralism through looking back at the history of multiculturalism in Native Americans history. Further, the article discusses how multiculturalism means different things in different cultures. Bruchac also stresses the idea that the Native Americans were not isolated from the rest of the world. As the writer explains there are evidence that suggest that the Native Americans were "not living in isolation" rather they used to welcome people coming from different part of the worlds, like Africa, Europe, and Asia. Bruchac also concludes that it is important to understand the multicultural nature of the Native Americans history before coming to teach "generic native Americans". Bruchac traces the definition of multiculturalism as people look differently at its meaning. He explains that while some people think that the term is against "national culture standards", others believe in the unity and plurality of multiculturalism. (p. 160)

Escamila, Kathy, and Sally Nathenson (2003) tackle the issue of the importance of teaching multicultural literature for children, especially in a culturally diverse country like the United States. However, in their article, they stress the need for teachers to be able to follow the new curriculum that should create a new learning environment that is based on cultural understanding as well as the love of other cultures. (p.238-248). This is only attainable as the authors suggest through developing the curriculum and enhancing the methods of teaching that should make teachers much more prepared to teach or deal with cultural diversity, like teaching multicultural literature inside the classroom. However, the study analyzes the problem of education for Latinos, and suggests some of the basic research questions to develop the quality of education the Latinos receive in the United States through incorporating multicultural education in curriculum. The study also showed that the Latinos scored below the white populations in education and, thus developing education through teaching cultural diversity and preparing teachers to be ready to deal with diversity would be the key issue.

4. Conclusion

Readers of children's literature can have a significant chance of analyzing the issue of cultural diversity in children's literature from different categories through looking at issues such as racism, poverty, gender equity, and religious

beliefs. In each one of these categories the readers will understand the importance of having solid knowledge about other cultures especially if they have been exposed to that culture. The lack of knowledge will significantly lead to the failure of the educational and didactic process, especially when come to teach diverse groups of students. In education, it is highly significant to refer to children's books that teach how to eliminate stereotypes or misconceptions like, *Red Bird* (Michell 1996), *Felita* (Mohr 1979), Ruby Bridges (Coles), the *Bread Winner*. (178) which can all help eliminates stereotypes about other cultures in terms of race, color, religion, and language.

From our point of view, the celebration of pluralism and multiculturalism has long been seen as a sign of cultural openness and awareness in children's literature. Many good examples on cultural pluralism are seen in children's books that celebrate the value of humanity as a universal concept rather than only a representation of national identity. The invitation to call upon pluralism as well as cultural diversity might probably constitute the new vision in children's literature. Despite the fact that children's literature has developed across an extended period of time, one has to think of the role that cultural diversity and its representation in children's literature have in developing the education and classrooms' curriculum. However, multicultural children's literature is still growing as many scholars and writers began to realize the importance of multicultural education.

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