Researching the Muslim Diaspora, Engaging Multicultural Literacy: A Pedagogical Approach

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Abstract: - Multicultural literacy has become a term that best represents the awareness of social-cultural diversity that exists in most countries today. As a skill, multicultural literacy also plays a vital role in the reading of minority fiction whose focal point, among others, is to partake in the recognition politics of the land. Within the Muslim Diasporic context, the value of multicultural literacy is pivotal now more than ever. With the dramatic deterioration of the trans-cultural social landscape around the world post 9/11 which has spiraled into a discourse of fear mongering, there is a more pronounced need to revive and revitalize the multicultural literacy project, specifically on Muslim Diaspora, towards promoting a more tolerant and hopeful living space for a multi-religious society as a whole. How can we promote the research into this emerging literary tradition within the university? And what effect will such research have in expanding our students’ multicultural literacy? This paper discusses these issues through the case study of two graduate theses on Muslim Diaspora.

Key-Words: - Muslim Diaspora, circles of engagement, circles of issues, multicultural literacy, pedagogy of literature

1 Introduction
This paper presents the pedagogy of researching Muslim Diaspora based on the supervision work done on two graduate theses. Using a revisioning of a literary approach previously constructed as “Circles of Issues” [1] the paper discusses how the research into Muslim Diaspora can be better facilitated and in so doing, assist in the development of a better multicultural literacy practice amongst university students. To begin with, what is multicultural literacy and how does it relate to the research of Muslim Diaspora?

2 Foregrounding Multicultural Literacy
Multicultural literacy has become a term that best represents the awareness of social-cultural diversity that exist in most countries today. Multicultural literacy requires an understanding of the different cultures in the society and this can be achieved through targeted programs at various levels of education that help increase the sensitivity and effectiveness of social engagement in a heterogeneous context. In other words, multicultural literacy can effectively make the world move “beyond binaries” [2] that continue to frame our intercultural and interreligious global relations, and promote engagement with the other. As a skill, multicultural literacy also plays a vital role in the reading of minority fiction whose focal point, among others, is to partake in the recognition politics of the land. Since fiction is endowed with literary agency that may offer the opportunities to transmit a ‘social reality’ of a community, minority fiction thus provides the reader of multicultural literature with useful insights into how to become “literate in multiple ways of perceiving and speaking about [the said] reality” [3].

Indeed, developing multicultural literacy can play a key role in changing the mindsets of both majority and minority communities while promoting the plural geographies of land. The inclusion of minority fiction in university curriculums, for instance, will have a strong positive effect both for majority and for minority alike. By showcasing minority fiction in the curriculum, minorities of the land will feel a sense of “recognition” [4] that signals the acceptance of mainstream society. The exposure to minority fiction likewise will facilitate in the raising of awareness of the Other in
mainstream society beyond stereotypes and racial profiling.

Within the Muslim Diasporic context, the value of multicultural literacy is pivotal now more than ever. With the dramatic deterioration of the trans-cultural social landscape around the world post 9/11 which has spiraled into a discourse of fear mongering [5] there is a more pronounced need to revive and revitalize the multicultural literacy project, specifically on Muslim Diaspora, towards promoting a more tolerant and hopeful living space for a multi-religious society as a whole. How can we promote the research into this emerging literary tradition within the university? The following section presents how we, as teachers of literature at the National University of Malaysia, set out to mobilize the student body into researching this area.

3 Current Research Interests in Muslim Diaspora

As a corpus, Muslim Diaspora is an ever growing literary tradition with writers from a heterogeneous background who display various social, cultural and religious identities in their works of fiction. Among the prominent and prolific Diasporic Muslim writers in the world include Egyptian-Palestinian Australian Randa Abdel-Fattah, Greek American Jamilah Kolocotronis, African American Umm Zakiyyah, Pakistani British Mohsin Hamid and Afghanistan French Atiq Rahimi.

Based on our on-going research into Muslim Diaspora in Fiction, here are some of the fundamental conclusions that have been reached. Firstly, Muslim women’s self-narratives reconcile their past experiences and present ‘actualities’ to illustrate multiplicity and fluidity of the Muslim self [6]. Secondly, notions of the diasporic home signal the value of memories and political concerns that root the Diasporic community’s social and cultural identities [7]. Thirdly, as an integral symbol, the ‘veil’ is often times used to negotiate, resist and reinvent the Muslim Diaspora’s realities and identities [8]. Lastly, xenophobia and politics of othering within minority communities continue to shape the complexity of being a member of a multi-cultural, multi-religious society for the Diasporic Muslims [9]. The central implication of these findings signals the availability of patterns emerging within the heterogeneous social and geographical landscapes of the Diasporic Muslim narratives, which will, as this study asserts, facilitate the formation of a working pedagogical approach.

At the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, National University of Malaysia, Muslim Diaspora is an area of study that is garnering greater interest among our undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate students. Among the current research on this area include “Pitfalls And Pranks: An Analysis Of The Identity Struggle Of The Muslim American Teen”, “Islamophobia: Stereotypes, Struggles, and Truths In Mohsin Hamid’s The Reluctant Fundamentalist”, “Love In A Headscarf: Muslim women post 9/11”, and “Migration and fractured identity in Mohammad Abdul-Wali’s They Die Strangers.” The theoretical framework taken by each researcher varies. However, the fundamental pedagogical approach of these theses is to engage the student’s critical and creative abilities to move beyond the particulars of the plot towards making connections with the context that assisted in the development of the narrative. The following section presents the proposed pedagogical approach towards facilitating research into Muslim Diaspora and in so doing promote multicultural literacy among university students.

4 Circles of Engagement: A Pedagogical Approach

An available pedagogical approach in researching Muslim Diaspora is the concept previously used as a literary tool to mobilize critical responses among undergraduate learners of literature at the National University of Malaysia. Termed as “Circles of Issues” [1], the literary tool is rooted in collaborative and active learning strategies where learners are taught step-by-step how to participate directly with any given texts using the primary features of Literature. The principle of this concept is that a learner can begin by critically examining a text at a micro level through a focused reading of a character. At this stage, the learner is guided to ask a set of basic personal-response-type questions about the character and his/her relationship with other characters (See Fig.1).

Once these elementary character-based questions are addressed and the learner is prepared with a critical response about the character, he/she can now gradually begin to widen the circles of discussion and subsequently connect the characterization to the central conflict of the story and later, the central theme of the text. This approach was found to assist in drawing out learners’ responses to the text by tapping into their available “horizon of expectations” or the “mind-set” that they “bring to any text” [10].
In the same vein, researching the corpus of Muslim Diaspora was also made more accessible using a revised version of the literary tool. First, the student focuses on the study of fiction at the Text-level. Second, she gradually widens the circles of engagement with the inclusion of information about the writer and later the context from which the said narrative is set. By enlarging her circles of inquiry, she will move towards developing a hypothesis of the research. The central premise of the approach is that the gradual increase of the ‘Circles of Engagement’ can be drawn based on what the researcher feels is relevant. The Circles of Engagement is essentially made up of three central components of Text, Writer and Context (see Fig 2).

The argument is that a text is drawn out of the “author defined social reality” [11] and is set within a specified social/cultural/political context. The task of a researcher of fiction then is to develop the circles of engagement based on his/her response as a critical reader of the text.

As a case study, two graduate students’ theses on Muslim Diaspora will be used to illustrate how the Circles of Engagement is utilised as a pedagogical tool. Albeit the two researches required different theoretical and conceptual framework, the initial pedagogical approach taken by the students is mutual, as the following section presents.

Case Study 1 [12]

The first thesis is on Randa Abdel-Fattah’s Ten Things I Hate about me. The novel narrates the story of a Muslim Lebanese Australian young adult who experiences identity crisis in the face of being a member of a Muslim minority while attempting to assimilate with the White Australia society. The researcher’s approach began with one of the fundamental elements of Literature – setting. In this novel, the multicultural landscape is shown to be an important character that facilitates the creation of the conflict experienced by the protagonist as she struggles to be part of the mainstream white Australian society while being an active member of her minority Lebanese Australian community.

Using circles of engagement, the student initially questioned the importance of the setting, specifically the spatial component, and how it affects the protagonist (See Fig. 3). The identity crisis experienced by the protagonist Jamilah is rooted in her inability to resolve the differences between her cultural heritage and her Australian identity. The student then proceeded to widen her circle of engagement by considering the background information about the author as a representation of the concerns of the text. Drawing on this information, the hypothesis reads as such: the internal conflict faced by the Muslim young adult Jamilah later escalated in her experiencing a sense of marginalization within her own Muslim Diasporic community due to her need to be both recognized for her cultural attachment and assimilate with the larger White Australian culture. The protagonist inadvertently developed a ‘minority within minority’ crisis. (See Fig. 3)
Case Study 2 [13]

The second thesis is an analysis of Jamilah Kolocotronis’ Echoes. The novel tells the story of a revert Caucasian American man who experiences the intricacies of reversion in post 9/11 America. The student’s research approach began with another of the fundamental elements of Literature – character. In this novel, the protagonist Joshua Adams experiences a variety of emotional and psychological conflicts rooted in his childhood. Using circles of engagement, the student initially developed his own critical questions that required him to closely scrutinize Joshua’s values and life choices before and after embracing Islam (See Fig. 4). Albeit Islam at first appears to create a more structured approach in his life, Joshua’s conflicts especially those connected to his past relationships and actions prior to being a Muslim, continue to persist. By widening the circles of inquiry and making connections to the author Jamilah Kolocotronis’ own revert background, the student proceeded to question the context of being a Muslim revert in multicultural American – how does this new experience colour the character’s approach to being an American?

Fig. 4. Case Study 2

The hypothesis drawn from this line of questioning is that Joshua’s sense of identity continues to be in a state of flux largely because of his inability to strike a balance between being an American and becoming a Muslim. The narration thus is a journey towards understanding the intricacies of reversion for the protagonist who by association to Islam and Muslims, inherits the politics of identity (See Fig. 4).

The pedagogical approach presented in this paper focuses on the importance of widening the circles of engagement to facilitate research work in literary studies. Both the theses discussed in this section showcased a mutual pedagogy of approach in the reading of Muslim Diasporic fiction. In both cases, the preliminary line of discussion began with the element of Literature, be that setting or character. The researchers then proceeded to widen the circles of inquiry connecting text with the context of the multicultural society on which it is set. The circles of engagement also took into consideration the authors’ background and the Muslim Diaspora canon on which these works of fiction can be situated. It is in the drawing up of ‘the bigger picture’, i.e. of seeing the work of fiction within its contextual background that the hypotheses are formulated.

This discussion warrants attention as too often we disregard a text for the labels attached to it. A Muslim diasporic fiction, as the paper states, is equally engaging and has a place in the discourse of mainstream literature for its creative potential to raise critical issues faced by the multicultural society. Through the engagement of these diasporic Muslim fictions, learners can harness their multicultural literacy given the appropriate pedagogical approach.

5 Conclusion

In foregrounding the importance of multicultural literacy, this paper sets out to deal with the “great enemy of truth” that continues to colour our intercultural relations – the “persistent, persuasive and unrealistic” “myth” [14] of the Muslim Diaspora in multicultural landscapes of the western world. Literacy of our diversity is a prerequisite towards promoting the coexistence among both minority and majority people of the world and literature, as stated earlier, is endowed with the agency to engage the learning of awareness of the other.

Based on the two graduate theses on Muslim Diaspora at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics at the National University of Malaysia, what can be deduced is that readers of fiction begin their engagement with the text at the same place irrespective of the literary tradition. The approach used for students to tackle the texts makes use of the available schema of literary studies and mobilizes the student’s multicultural literacy, a necessary skill for students in tertiary education. Through a more targeted pedagogy that utilizes the circles of engagement, students begin with a primary inquiry, which is later expanded to include other aspects of the text that enlarge their reading lens. The writings of the Muslim diaspora offer a wealth of discourses about Islam especially in the current climate where the religion stands in sharp focus. And such an
engagement, as the paper asserts, brings current social issues to the literature classroom and helps promote the much needed development of multicultural literacy among our learners.

References: