



THE KITE RUNNER: ROLE OF MULTICULTURAL FICTION IN FOSTERING CULTURAL COMPETENCE

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ABSTRACT

To survive in today's world of rapid changes in technology, society and demography, it has become necessary to re-examine the knowledge, skills and abilities needed. The diversity of class room makes it imperative for teachers to develop cultural competence which can enable them to connect with, respond to and interact effectively with students. Students too should be culturally competent so that they can be responsive and successful in their communication with the world outside academia. Cultural competence is not mere awareness and understanding but the ability to navigate interaction with cultures other than one's own. An inter-culturally competent person captures and understands the specific concepts of perception, thinking, acting and feeling of people from foreign cultures while interacting with them.

Multicultural literature promotes cultural awareness as it is deeply engaging and elicits empathy from readers. It can engage the readers in cultural and societal issues for meaningful reflection and application thus building sensitiveness for fostering cultural competence. It transcends its literal value and contributes to cultural awareness. The focused study of multicultural texts not only transfer facts and knowledge but develops new frameworks for functioning within a diverse society. *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini has such subtle depictions of Afghan Culture which makes it a powerful tool in shaping cultural understanding. It not only gives a cultural and historical overview of Afghanistan but also addresses its more recent events with the Taliban Regime. It helps in breaking through stereo types and misrepresentations by the media and offers an opportunity to consider the humanity behind the media hype.

Keywords: Cultural Competence, Multicultural, Diversity, Kite Runner, Fiction

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid changes in technology, society and demographics have made it imperative for us to re-examine our knowledge, skills and abilities necessary to survive and develop in the present and future world. Today's world promotes and encourages culturally competent and linguistically appropriate exchanges and collaborations among families, professionals, students and communities in order to become responsive towards issues such as culture, race, gender, social and economic status. It is therefore important to understand and develop cultural competence.

Managing Cultural Differences

Globalization has made the whole world a global village. This has increased the need for interaction with people belonging to different cultures. The activities of global markets are coordinated by using different communication technology media which collaborate virtually. Whether the interaction with the outside world and other people is virtual or real it is important to understand cultural differences, the absence of which could have a negative effect on the intervention. Best (Best 1) developed the concept of inclusive democracy and promotes equal participation from all groups in the world, which is an admirable yet utopian vision in the present time. It has become necessary to socialize youth to carry on a societal culture in a global era in order to engage them in an ever-growing world of diversity and complexity. Globalization has changed the ways we experience national identity and cultural belonging. Identity is becoming increasingly fluid according to Ivanova (209). Globalization has blurred political and cultural borders that once separated nations and states along with people who reside in them (Suarez-Orozco 209). Modern nations are trying their best to manage

differences and teach students to compete and contrast cultural models, ideologies and social practices, adjust to and accommodate differences of kinship, gender, language and complicated interactions involving race, ethnicity and inequality (Mary, Reese et al. 98), thus making them culturally competent.

Cultural Competency

Cultural Competency has become the need of the hour, it has become necessary in our public and private life, because cultures vary not only between continents and nations but within the same work place or even family, depending upon geographical, ethical, ethnical, moral, religious, political or historical differences. It helps a person to understand and interact effectively with people of different cultures. By understanding the meaning of culture one can understand Cultural Competence .

Chamberlain (197) represents culture as "the values, norms and traditions that affect how individuals of a particular group perceive, think, interact, behave and make judgments about their world⁵. Taylor in 1996 defined culture as, "an integrated pattern of human behaviour including thought, communication, ways of interacting, roles and relationships, beliefs, values, practices and customs" (Wikipedia, Competence).

Cultural Competency is also associated with diversity, and from an organizational communicational perspective a diverse culture. Diversity initiatives encourage the process of including the perspectives of under represented, non dominant groups in organizations to ensure they have a voice. The word competence is used because it implies possessing the capacity and capability to function within the context of culturally integrated patterns of human behaviour defined by a group. In this context being competitive means learning new patterns of

behaviour and effectively applying them in the appropriate settings.

Cultural Competence, thus refers to an ability to interact effectively with people of different cultures, particularly in the context of human resources, non profit organizations and government agencies whose employees work with persons from different cultural/ethnic backgrounds ((Wikipedia, Competence).

Psychologist - Paul Peterson used the term multicultural competence in a mental health publication almost a decade before the term cultural competence became popular. He gave a multicultural model emphasizing its three components as awareness, knowledge and skills. Diversity training university International DTUI added a fourth cognitive component for developing cultural competence and that is the attitude of a person.

Components of Cultural Competency

Awareness. A person should be conscious of his own personal reactions to people who are different.

Attitude - A person should carefully examine his own attitude towards cultural differences, whether it is biased or unbiased. People should carefully examine their own beliefs and values about cultural differences.

Knowledge - One should have knowledge of different cultural practices and worldviews. Our values and beliefs about equality may be inconsistent with our behaviours and we may be ironically unaware of it.

Skills - Focuses on practicing cultural competence to perfection. Communication is fundamental tool by which we can interact with different people (Wikipedia, Competence).

Role of Multicultural Fiction

A culturally competent person understands the specific concepts in perception, thinking, feeling and acting of people from foreign cultures and interacts,

effectively with them. It is possible to attain cultural competence through reading multicultural literature as it promotes cultural sensitivity through building awareness. It holds a context that is immediately relevant to reader's lives. It elicits an empathetic response by actively engaging its audience. A person learns about his attitude towards other cultures, by analyzing and examining his own culture, beliefs, biases and behaviours. He discovers his own attitudes and actions which are shaped by the culture in which he is brought up.

After studying a variety of Multicultural works a person achieves heightened levels of cultural understanding, awareness of one's own self and the larger world, all these form the fundamental concept for developing the attitudes and acquiring the skills necessary for interacting effectively with people belonging to other cultures.

The Novel is an ideal means to build cultural competence and has a real role to play in producing global citizens. The dynamics of society and culture are changing and there is a need to equip students with a modernized and culturally broadened framework for developing an understanding of the world. Multicultural literature helps in attaining cultural competency by promoting cultural sensitivity through building awareness. Such books transcend their literacy value and stimulate the growth of skills of cultural competence.

Multicultural Literature exposes people to history, geography, social conditions, class conflicts and violations of the human rights of an individual or group of the people of a particular class, creed, sex, religion or nationality. Through meaningful textual interaction and discourse they expose readers to cultural values of place along with its physical conditions, which the readers

otherwise do not have a chance to access and explore.

These books have the power of absorbing the reader. Readers are so much engaged in the novels that they not only witness the story and encounter the happenings, but begin experiencing the culture, sorrows, atrocities and happiness of the characters. Students experience the unfamiliar world and find similarities or differences to their own experiences irrespective of their own background. They connect themselves with culture, characters and incidents and thus respond to them emotionally as well as intellectually. Multicultural Fiction has the power to elicit responses from the readers after linking them with the stories. These books help in developing an understanding of the diverse cultures of the world.

Multicultural novels can build the sensitivity necessary for respectful and effective interaction with individuals from cultural groups other than one's own. Not only this, they help in affirming cultural identities for minority students, who can find connections to their own experiences. Thus multicultural literature helps in producing harmony amongst global citizens. When the teacher combines the understanding of the students with purposeful instruction and critical analysis it helps in developing cultural competency skills. Inger Bierschink writes that "literature is a necessary instrument for perceiving the disparity of a society and for developing competence" (Bierschenk 12). According to Banks it is important to break people out of the 'ethnic encapsulation' to learn cultural competency (Banks 29). According to Bartol and Richardson building cultural competence requires people to step "outside one's traditional value orientation" (Bartol, Lenora 12). Cultural competence has become a necessary skill for navigating societal interactions.

***The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hussein as a multicultural novel**

The Kite Runner has the power of exciting emotions, provoking thoughts and touching the hearts of the readers of diverse cultures. Khaled Hussein subtly describes Afghan culture along with giving us an insight into the personal gains and losses of individual characters. He writes about large scale global sufferings and assaults on the human rights, intricately weaving it with small painful moments in the life of the victims. In the novel he incorporates a large number of themes of invasion, adventure, intrigue, rivalry, betrayal, friendship and escape.

Hussein gives a pathetic picture of war torn Afghanistan and while reading, readers become spectators viewing streets thronged with baggers, old men, widows, orphaned children suffering from utter poverty and hunger, living in an atmosphere of constant fear of bombing and shelling. The narrative is so powerful that readers can breathe the dust, smell the sewers and hear the gunshots and rattle of military trucks. Hussein engages readers and makes people witness the atrocities of war. This helps in developing and eliciting the empathy of the readers, and thus an understanding of the people of Afghanistan.

He writes about Afghanistan his country during peace times in order to show that Afghans are a peace loving people who have a rich cultural heritage. He describes the boyhood days of Amir the protagonist of the novel, who had a mania for kite flying and spent days and months for this passion. "Winter was every kid's favorite season in Kabul, at least those whose fathers could afford to buy a good iron stove. The reason was simple: They shut down school the icy season... And kites, of course. And running them loved winter line in Kabul (Hussein 49) His boyhood friend and servant Hassan, whom he betrays later is a

story with which a reader can make connections with his own childhood days. He writes in detail about the traditions of Afghanistan, like the Khastegari tradition, the marriage of Amir with Soriya in a traditional Afghan manner, suffering the relationship of Amir with his strong father Baba, his sufferings and expectations from his father and loss of identity at the death of Baba who was a proud, bold and powerful man; and the ceremonies at the death of Baba. All these descriptions help in developing an understanding of Afghan Culture, as readers are absorbed in this realistic imagery.

We can witness Afghan culture even when Hussein writes about his country's geography, ancient history and recent events with the Taliban regime. He writes about the seasons and celebrations, and about the Afghan summers and winters, the high mountain ranges, the harsh snow of winters and hot dry winds of summers which bring dust storms. When readers learn about Afghanistan's geography what they gain is a sense of majesty and remoteness. This is the message which Khaled Hussein wishes to convey about Afghanistan's culture too that his country has a majestic culture but it is remote as people of the world are unaware of it. Physical geography of Afghanistan has landlocked the country. It was embattled and ravaged by powerful military forces from both West and East, Russia and USA. Khaled Hussein along with writing about the rugged terrain of the country, not only describes the physical beauty of his motherland but also writes about the spiritual beauty of the people. Though his country has faced wars and internal disturbances, but this has not affected the dignity and pride of the people.

Hussein has written about the ethnic struggle in Afghanistan. He tells us about facts through fiction. The protagonist Amir belongs

to the privileged Pashtun class, whereas his servant Hassan and his father Ali belong to the marginalized Hazara Class. Amir's father Baba betrays Ali and Amir too betrays Hassan by not helping Hassan when he is molested by other boys, while kite running for Amir. Ali and his son Hassan show their loyalty and respect towards their masters even after this betrayal, but both make amends later on. Amir gets rid of his childhood guilt by finding a way to be good again by adopting Hassan's son and becoming a kite runner for him, a boy belonging to Hazara class. Thus he himself develops cultural tolerance. His act signifies the rectification of the injustices committed by Pashtuns against the Hazaras. Hussein traces the forefathers of the Hazara class who were considered to be of a Mongol descent. He also writes about the historic fact of 1998 when hundreds of Hazaras were massacred in Mazar-e-Sharif by the Talibans.

The Kite Runner draws the attention of the world towards the horrible condition of the children of Afghanistan during war. They are victims of the war, living in a state of poverty, as they have lost their fathers and their mothers are not allowed to go and work outside. They have not seen schools; they do not have proper food, clothing and shelter. Hussein also refers to the tradition of bachha baazi in Afghanistan where adult males harass young boys and dress them up as females. Hussein (227) writes "There are many children but little childhood in Afghanistan". Readers can not neglect children forced into adulthood prematurely. Mary F. Agnillo and Reese H. Todd write – "We frame this discussion with in the macro concept of place - the global village now united and requiring communication skills in interpersonal intercultural interactions to be taught and learned in classrooms as technology mediated environments and at the micro level of Hussein's sense of loss and destruction of

Afghanistan a place in dire need of social justice and empathic attention from the international community" (Reza, Salarzai 1).

The novel has also helped in presenting a true picture of Afghanistan when media was presenting a distorted image of Afghanistan with coverage on the war of terrorism. Shaheen (29) in her research has reported that the Arab community and other ethnic groups are negatively portrayed by the media. According to Watson Afghan people have been portrayed by the media as terrorists in USA (Watson, 2). When stereotypes and consequent fears influence the world views of a society it starts believing that it is difficult to live in harmony. The media like the Hollywood movies has villanised the Islamic religious fundamentalism in a stereotypical manner, thus hindering the understanding of the Muslims worldwide.

Khaled Hussein gives the readers a lens to see and construct a new cultural impression of his country and take into account individuals living there, by getting rid off all misunderstandings of their culture. He offers an alternate view of Afghanistan, contradictory to those presenting Afghans as a warring community and Afghanistan as a land of aggression and hatred. International students can also learn about Eurasia through Hussein's novels. They can learn recent and ancient history, increase their geographic literacy to become international citizens, and develop skills necessary for building cultural competency.

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