

Closing the Gap Between Literature and the Social Studies: An Introduction to Writers of the Non-Western World

by

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The study of culture is an important component in the curriculum of secondary social studies classes such as Global Studies, World History, Anthropology, and Sociology. Studying culture is also an important component of classes in literature departments such as World Literature, American Studies, and the Humanities. Within this curricular context, teachers of both social studies and literature often have little knowledge of the development and transformation of cultures outside the Western world. As a result, non-Western culture is typically overlooked in the curriculum or given superficial treatment. Often it is presented in a manner which reinforces existing stereotypes of life in the developing world.

Reading and analyzing non-Western literature is one method of providing teachers and students with important insights into the cultural development and transformation of societies in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. I was able to gain deeper insights into the nature of life in the developing world through an Independent Study Grant provided by The Council for Basic Education in Washington, D.C. In my study I read 15 works of fiction written by novelists from Africa, Latin America, and Asia. From the reading of non-Western literature I attempted to fulfill several objectives: (1) to gain a deeper understanding of the human dimension of life in a developing society; (2) to synthesize literature and social sciences to gain a clearer perspective of the political, economic, social, and literary realities of developing societies; (3) to acquire a more broad understanding of the humanities and how it can be applied in the context of the non-Western world; (4) to gain more in-depth knowledge of non-Western culture; and (5) to enhance respect for multiculturalism and global awareness. In short, I undertook the study to overcome a Western bias which I feel is found in much of the curriculum of both the social studies and the humanities. I agree with the comments of Rick Simonsen and Scott Walker, editors of the book *Multicultural Literacy: Opening The American Mind*, who state: "Americans need to broaden their awareness and understanding of the cultures of the rest of the world. Other histories and cultures reveal ancestry and knowledge that has bearing on who we are and where we are going." (1) Literature

provides an unique and insightful way of fulfilling the old dictum that "through others we see ourselves."

In the discussion that follows I will present brief descriptions of the work of six novelists from the developing world: Ezekiel Mphahlele (South Africa), Chinua Achebe (Nigeria), Ba Jin (People's Republic of China), R.K. Narayan (India), Gabriel Garcia Marquez (Colombia), and Miguel Angel Asturias, (Guatemala). For each writer's work I will illustrate various economic, political, and social themes apparent in the novel, provide questions which are designed to help teachers gain a clearer perspective of non-Western culture, and suggest ways the novels can be utilized in a classroom setting.

I

Ezekiel Mphahlele writes in *Down Second Avenue* of the psychological torment associated with living under apartheid in South Africa. His experience is one of confronting oppression, facing the constant demonstration of racial superiority displayed by whites, and the continuous struggle to avoid the misery of poverty. Life for Mphahlele is one of a second class citizen who has little stake in the future of his country. His story is one of personal transformation, rebellion, and triumph over injustice and the power of a totalitarian state.

In *Things Fall Apart* Chinua Achebe describes the slow, steady encroachment of an alien religion, Christianity, and its impact upon centuries of tradition and spiritual development among the Ibo of West Africa. Through the use of Ibo proverbs and an exploration into traditional economic and political practices, Achebe portrays the Ibo as a rational, forgiving, fair, and at times, violent society. Decisions are based on consensus, historical precedent, spiritual forcefulness, and communal interests. With the introduction of Christianity, traditional Ibo practices and beliefs come under attack. In conjunction with the colonial military administration, missionaries establish an arbitrary legal system which discriminates against non-Christians. Communal laws and allegiances are undermined and the family structure is placed under severe strain. Ultimately, the Ibo fall under total foreign domination and the once proud culture is left weak and fragmented.

In the novel *Family* Ba Jin describes the gradual disintegration of the patriarchal family structure and Confucian ethics caused by an influx of Western values during the May 4th Movement of early twentieth century China. The destruction of the Kao family becomes a motif for the larger destruction of Chinese norms and values caused by the Western influences of humanism, feminism, and socialism. In this conflict

between cultural value systems, the Kao family splits along generational lines with the younger members embracing Western ideas and the older members clinging to the ways of the past.

R.K. Narayan writes a coming of age novel tracing the adolescent years of a young Indian living under British colonialism in *Swami and Friends*. Narayan emphasizes several universal themes about growing up in his novel: the happiness of making friends and the despair of losing them; the conflict involved in understanding the older generation; the realization that politics often has a direct impact on people's lives; and the discovery of self. *Swami and Friends* portrays a picture of the British Raj as a colonial administration which denigrates Indian values and religious practices. In the face of this denigration the protagonist, Swami, turns to the teachings of the Hindu classics, *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*, and the spiritual and ethical guidance of Mahatma Gandhi. In doing this, Swami creates a pure Indian identity which allows him to cope with the constant pressures to become more "English."

Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is rich in metaphors and parody. The ill-fortunes of the Buendia family become synonymous with the rise and fall of Latin American social, economic, and political institutions. Garcia Marquez views Latin America as being stricken with mediocre leadership, economic exploitation, unchecked militarism, and a libertine, landowning aristocracy.

Miguel Angel Asturias analyzes the triad of redemption, identity, and the resurrection of the indigenous Indians of Central America in his novel *Men of Maize*. Asturias utilizes a writing style referred to as "magical realism" (2) in which the difference between animate and inanimate, the real and the imagined become blurred in a mystical array of images based on Indian oral tradition, myths, and legends. Although Asturias relies on symbolism and naturalistic metaphors, the novel contains a shocking realism which identifies the destitution, exploitation, and political violence experienced by Central America's indigenous peoples. Asturias cleverly masks the cultural genocide of traditional peoples through his imagery. *Men of Maize* identifies man's inherent desire for greed at the expense of an entire race and the environment that sustains them.

In each of the novels described above the writers have confronted the interplay between cultural tradition and the movement toward modernization, often reflected through Western values and philosophy. In the resulting conflict much is at stake. Not only are centuries of cultural development threatened but the search for self, often defined by cultural tradition, is thrown into flux. As such, each writer describes a struggle

of gigantic proportions. On the one hand, there exists the desire to prevent Western encroachment and to protect the self from being lost in some modernistic, Western void. On the other hand, "all things modern" and the values associated with modernism have a magnetic appeal. The extreme individualism and personal freedom found in Western culture becomes difficult to resist in a tradition bound society.

From the standpoint of the classroom these writers represent voices from the globe's "silent majority." An analysis of their works provides teachers and students alike with deeper insights into the human condition, at least from the perspective of those who have felt the pain of oppression, poverty, and the denial of human rights. Reading the works of these writers begs us to ask questions that should not be ignored in our daily classroom instruction. In the discussion that follows I will attempt to identify key conceptual questions which arise from the novels described above and the ways in which these questions can be applied in a classroom setting.

II

For Ezekiel Mphahlele Second Avenue was his "springboard of slum life." It was here he experienced first-hand the oppression associated with being black and living in the apartheid system. Mphahlele eloquently expresses the injustice of apartheid when he writes:

Black man cleans the streets but mustn't work freely on the pavement; Black man must build homes for the white man but cannot live in them; black man cooks the white man's food but eats what is left over. (p. 17)

Excerpts such as this give students a vivid impression of life under apartheid. In *Down Second Avenue* students can gain a clearer perspective of what it means to be black in South Africa. After exploring the historical characteristics of apartheid in South Africa several important questions can become the focus of class discussions:

1. What is racism and for what reasons does it occur?
2. Based on Mphahlele's personal account, what psychological effect does racism have upon the individual? Upon society?
3. Are there similarities between the racism which exists in South Africa and that which exists in the United States?
4. What strategies can be created to reduce racist ideas?

Classroom activities might involve discussion activities that explore the

impact of racism upon the individual. Students might write a research paper comparing the black liberation movement in South Africa with the black civil rights movement in the United States. Debates could analyze whether non-violent civil disobedience or violent armed struggle is the best method for promoting black majority rule in South Africa.

In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* the deleterious impact of colonialism upon the peoples of West Africa is aptly described in the following discourse given by an Ibo elder during a village feast:

...I fear for you young people because you do not understand how strong is the bond of kinship. You do not know what it is to speak with one voice. And what is the result? An abominable religion has settled among you. A Man can now leave his father and brothers. He can curse the gods of his fathers and his ancestors, like a hunter's dog that suddenly goes mad and turns on his master. (p. 156-157)

Achebe's novel presents teachers with a unique method of introducing the history of European colonialism in Africa. Questions worthy of classroom attention might include the following:

1. What enabled Europeans to subject African people to colonial rule?
2. What was the social, economic, political, and cultural impact of colonialism upon traditional African societies?
3. According to Achebe, what relationship exists between religion and European success in creating colonial control in Africa?
4. What is the relationship between the era of European control in Africa and the current situation of under-development common to many African nations which experienced colonialism?

After reading *Things Fall Apart* students will acquire insights into traditional West African culture, the impact of colonialism upon West African societies, and the complexity of cross-cultural conflict. A variety of classroom activities would be appropriate. For example, students might engage in a comparative study of colonialism between a specific country in Africa and one in Asia or Latin America. Students might want to read selections from Franz Fanon's *Black Faces White Masks*, writing an essay analyzing the effect that colonialism had upon the African identity. Parallels with *Things Fall Apart* could be given. Groups could engage in role playing exercises in which they recreated the various positions of those involved in the colonial relationship. Students would then research the various attitudes toward colonial rule of European politi-

cians promoting an imperialist philosophy, European merchants wanting to establish trade networks abroad, missionaries, and African tribal leaders whose villages were effected by colonial rule.

Likewise, in R.K. Narayan's *Swami and Friends* students can gain an adolescent's perspective of growing up under colonial rule. Teachers could design lessons comparing the approach that Narayan's protagonist, Swami took in coping with the colonial presence in his country with the very different approach used by Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*.

In *Family*, Ba Jin's intergenerational conflict is best characterized by the attitude of the young protagonist, Chueh-hui, who looks at his grandfather and states:

It seemed to him that the person lying in the cane reclining chair was not his grandfather but the representative of an entire generation. He knew that the old man and he - the representative of the grandson's generation - could never see eye to eye. (p. 67.)

From a reading of *Family* students gain an appreciation for the process of cultural change and how it effects traditional values, beliefs, and institutions such as the family. Lessons should provide background material on the impact of Confucius on the Chinese value system. Class discussions might revolve around the following questions:

1. What role do values play in society?
2. In the passing of one generation to another is conflict inevitable for society?
3. Why do Western values seem so attractive to many non-western cultures? From reading *Family* what do you think are the positive and negative aspects of the introduction of Western values into a society such as China?
4. Do you think the United States is undergoing a crisis of values similar to that which China experienced in the early twentieth century?

Classroom activities might include a comparative study of the May 4th Movement of 1919 and the student demonstrations in Tiananamen Square in June of 1989. Students could write essays analyzing Western and non-Western interpretations of the role of the family, educational practices, belief systems, and work. Finally, students could write a position paper analyzing the advantages and disadvantages of cultural change in society.

From a Latin American perspective, Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* also examines cultural contacts between modern and traditional societies. With regard to "invading gringos" Garcia writes:

No one knew yet what they were after, or whether they were actually nothing but philanthropists, and they had already caused a colossal disturbance, much more than that of the old gypsies, but less transitory and understandable. Endowed with means that had been reserved for Divine Providence in former times, they changed the pattern of the rains, accelerated the cycle of harvest, and moved the river from where it had always been and put it with its white stones and icy currents on the other side of town, behind the cemetery. ...so many changes took place in such a short time that eight months after Mr. Herbert's visit the old inhabitants had a hard time recognizing their own town. (p. 214-215)

After reading *One Hundred Years of Solitude* teachers may want to analyze the history of American foreign relations with Latin America. Students can gain a clearer picture of how the military, church, and ruling oligarchies have effected Latin America's economic, political, and social development. Discussion questions might include the following:

1. Why has the United States maintained such an aggressive foreign policy with regard to Latin America?
2. Has United States policy toward Latin America aided or disrupted the region's political development?
3. Do you think Garcia Marquez's attitude toward U.S. involvement in Latin America is shared by most Latin Americans?
4. Garcia Marquez suggests that landownership, the Church, and the military are institutions which have had the greatest impact on Latin America's historical development. What role has the United States taken in supporting these institutions?

Lessons related to *One Hundred Years of Solitude* might include essays investigating the search for democracy in Latin America. Students could research the history of U.S. military intervention in the region, drawing conclusions as to whether the interventions were justified. Finally, students could write a creative piece which traces the life and times of a landless family in Latin America. How would their life story be different from the life of the Buendia Family?

In *Men of Maize* Miguel Angel Asturias explores man's exploitative nature. Both the natural environment and other men who are powerless

The earth will become exhausted and the planter will take his little seeds off somewhere else, until he too begins to waste away like a discolored seed fallen in the midst of fertile lands ripe for planting, lands that could make him a rich man instead of a nobody who wanders around ruining the earth everywhere he goes, always poor, and finally losing all pleasure in good things he could have had: sugar cane on the hot low lying slopes, where the air grows thick over the banana groves and the cacao trees shoot up like rockets in the sky to explode silently in sprays of almond-colored berries, not to mention the coffee, in rich soils splattered with blood and the wheatfields a blaze beyond. (p. 6)

suffer. Asturias makes the following comments about the maize growers who plant purely for profit:

In *Men of Maize* students will explore concepts pertaining to cultural genocide, environmental destruction, and Mayan mysticism. Teachers can initiate discussions which investigate the causes of global environmental decay, the fate of indigenous peoples, and the nature of human rights abuse in Latin America. Discussion questions might include:

1. Is man, as Asturias suggests, inherently greedy?
2. What are the causes and consequences of global environmental destruction?
3. Should economic growth take precedent over protection of the natural environment?
4. What types of alternative strategies exist in which economic growth and respect for the environment occur simultaneously?

Asturias' novel is multidimensional in its analysis. Classroom activities might involve researching the causes and implications of destroying the world's rainforests. Students could debate whether economic growth and the creation of jobs is a priority over protection of the environment. Finally, students could create a "Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples" after researching the ill-treatment of indigenous people around the world, including the treatment of Native Americans in the United States.

III

The six literary figures whose works have been discussed above analyze human nature from a variety of personal and cultural perspectives. They create universal themes in their literature which provide the reader with a better understanding of the human condition. Resurrection, redemption, the search for identity, the voices that cry out to stop exploitation and repression, and the struggle for personal and social liberation become common themes in their novels. These non-Western writers convey a unique experience based on a shared historical past characterized by European domination, economic exploitation, and disregard for their racial and cultural heritage. Controversial in nature, their literature seeks to address past wrongs, set the historical record straight, and resurrect a forgotten truth which has been ignored far too long in the West.

Notes

1. Rich Simonson and Scott Walker, (eds.) *Multicultural Literacy. Opening the American Mind*, Greywolf Press, St. Paul, 1988. For an excellent collection of short stories written by non-Western authors, see *The Greywolf Annual Six: Stories From The Rest Of The World*, edited by Scott Walker.
2. The literary style and philosophy of Miguel Angel Asturias is analyzed in an excellent introduction to *Men of Maize* by Gerald Martin.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY*

Below is a list of authors that teachers and students alike may find useful as an introduction to non-Western literature.

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*Teachers should use discretion concerning classroom use of each novel. Some contain objectional material and may be more suitable for adult reading.