Why Is Multicultural Literature Important to Young Americans?

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Introduction

Why is multicultural literature important to young Americans? Why does it matter that we introduce this literature to children early in their education? What changes can it make?

To provide perspective—not an answer—to these important questions, I seek to broaden our inquiry. Instead, what possibilities for heretofore unprecedented critical reading does multicultural literature offer to students? There are a few assumptions behind this question that are worth making explicit: (1) that the inclusion of multicultural literature in a curriculum does not suggest that canonical literature is not worth teaching nor that it must be removed; (2) that multicultural literature can be read with the same seriousness as canonical literature; and (3) that all students might find previously unexplored critical possibilities by reading multicultural literature. This removes us from the traditional constrictive framework that multicultural literature is only useful for multicultural individuals and therefore has no place in a holistic classroom setting. It removes us, indeed, from the label “multicultural literature” altogether. After all, every American partakes in multiple cultures (and here, I use “culture” as a term not just to denote ethnic affiliation).

The purpose of this project is to put forth a collection of questions and literature that might diversify high school English classroom discussions in more ways than one. The Bay Area is 27 percent Asian; Asians are the highest population group in two of its nine counties and the second highest in two others. I present two conclusions stemming from this: (1) there is more Asian art in the Bay Area today than ever before, and (2) there are more Asian students in the Bay Area today than ever before. To encounter art that represents you—or, unsettlingly, does not—is a transformative process, and the classroom setting has space to enable such transformation. This project focuses on South Asian American young adult literature—fiction written by Americans who are ethnically South Asian and often focuses on the lives of young South Asian Americans—which is by no means the only genre that can expand the classroom canon for us. It is but one intervention in the high school literary canon that allows students who identify with certain minority groups to expose themselves to literature in which they can personally invest.

This personal investment is key to our project and is the reason we are focusing on young adult literature. Often spurned by academia and the canon alike, YA literature has gained the reputation of being unserious and unable to sustain serious analysis. While this may be true of a lot of literature in general, the YA I recommend below does sustain critical analysis while welcoming the possibility of a reader’s affective response to and kinship with a book.
introduction

I hope that teachers can use this project to consider incorporating this and related literature into “lit circles,” allowing small groups of students to choose their own book and conduct discussions on it together. Alternatively, they could use these recommendations as a list of suggested books for a reading challenge. They could also ensure that some of these books are available at the high school library for interested students.

Essential Questions

When encountering literature that has the unbounded potential to open up parts of the reader’s own lived reality, students will inevitably grapple with some difficult questions. Like any other work of literature, these books can illuminate a part of the reader’s life that they have previously never seen in literature, but they can also alienate readers who don’t identify with particular symbols and mainstays of South Asian literature. I urge these students not to spurn the literature they don’t identify with, and eschew the burden of representation from these necessarily fallible narratives. As important as it is for a student who identifies as South Asian to see themselves in a work of South Asian literature, what does it mean for such a student to not see themselves in one of these works? What other facets of the “South Asian experience” might such unfamiliar books illuminate, thereby demolishing the monolith that even the best-intentioned readers impose on the genre?

In other words, what can South Asian literature be? What can it reveal? What boundaries does it break and what boundaries does it maintain? And what does all of this mean to a reader who identifies as South Asian who encounters the text for the first time? What does that reader experience that is distinct from their encounter with Western classics like The Iliad or The Republic? And is there a distinction at all?

These questions are perhaps too amorphous to even begin answering. Let us rather turn our attention to some more concrete iterations of these questions that get at some essential themes I have outlined.

1. What does it mean to be a South Asian American today?
2. What do South Asian Americans want to know about their history?
3. What do South Asian Americans notice about their own family and/or community?
4. What in this text resonates with you? What doesn’t? Why?
5. What do you think are the stereotypes that South Asian Americans face today? What, if anything, do you think this text does to dismantle those stereotypes?
1. *More Than Just a Pretty Face*, Syed Masood
   This debut novel by Muslim American author Syed Masood is set in the San Francisco Bay Area and follows the story of Daniyal, a charming high schooler who doesn’t really care about school and instead devotes his energy to cooking. Being Muslim isn’t easy for Daniyal, especially with his Pakistani parents and the expectations of the community, but when he meets Bisma—a girl so far from his type it’s funny—things turn around in more ways than one.

2. *Bruised*, Tanya Boteju
   Boteju’s second novel follows Sri Lankan Canadian Daya as she grieves the accident that took her parents from her and attempts to re-find meaning through roller derby and the connections she makes through it. This is a beautiful story about young queer love that is perhaps tonally better fit for older students.

3. *American Betiya*, Anuradha Rajurkar
   Rani finds herself caught between love and family in this highly praised debut by Rajurkar. Rani begins lying about her relationship with the charismatic Oliver just as his home life starts to unravel, leading to a reckoning that plays out when Rani is whisked away from her home in Illinois to Pune, India, for the summer.

4. *Zara Hossain Is Here*, Sabina Khan
   Texas-based Zara and her Pakistani immigrant family are overjoyed when their visa process is, at long last, finalized—but when Zara speaks out about a racist incident at school, her family finds themselves at the center of a violent crime that puts their future in America in jeopardy.

5. *The Jasmine Throne*, Tasha Suri
   A lush queer fantasy novel inspired by Hindu epics, this first novel in Suri’s *Burning Kingdoms* series follows Malini and Priya, princess and maidservant, who are forced into an allyship to save the empire.

   From the author of the acclaimed *Forget Tomorrow* series comes this humorous story following Winnie Tech, the youngest daughter of a Thai American family who is instructed by her parents to practice fake dating in high school. (Read the book to find out why.) Their first candidate just happens to be Winnie’s sworn childhood enemy.

7. *Counting Down with You*, Tashie Bhuiyan
   Bhuiyan’s debut follows Bangladeshi American Karina’s sudden entry into a fake relationship with her school’s resident bad boy, Ace Clyde, all while her parents just happen to be out of town for 28 days.

   Zayneb, angered by the Islamophobia she witnesses in school, meets Adam, grieving his mother and his multiple sclerosis diagnosis, in Qatar over spring break.
9. *Family Life*, Akhil Sharma

Brothers Ajay and Birju dream of the day they can join their father in America from their home in Delhi, and when they do, it is everything they’ve ever imagined and more. Like all dreams, this one ends, leaving Ajay to figure out where to go from there. This book is better for older students.

10. *Sunny G’s Series of Rash Decisions*, Navdeep Singh Dhillon

To honor his brother’s memory, Sunny decides to conduct a series of rash decisions, including shaving his beard and discarding his turban. On prom night, he meets Mindii, who only enables these decisions.
Activities

The following activities are recommended for helping students to debrief some of the key themes listed in the books above.

Activity 1: An Exercise in Identity and Motivation

This activity is intended to get students thinking about why characters do the things they do and, in turn, why they (the students) do the things they do. Often in these South Asian American YA novels, plot moves forward because characters make decisions based on—or despite—certain markers of their identity. In this writing exercise, we make explicit the connection between identity and action and find a way to relate it to the student’s own life.

- What identities does the protagonist have? What identities do you have?
- How do the protagonist’s identities affect their decisions?
- Who are the antagonists? Why do they antagonize?
- When was the last time you made a big decision? How, if in any way at all, did parts of your identity affect the situation and the result?

Activity 2: A Visual Representation of Who We Are

This activity is a bit more freeform and might be better for younger students. The students are given a sheet of paper with an outline of a body. On this figure, they have to think of one character and label each body part with a symbol or a theme from the book they’re reading. These could be as broad as the character’s religion or gender or as specific as their hobbies or obsessions. This also allows students to think more critically about ability and what makes up a body.

Label each part of this figure’s body with a symbol or a theme from the book you’re reading. For example, if you’re reading *More Than Just a Pretty Face*, you might label Daniyal’s hand with “cooking” and his head “confused about being Muslim.” BONUS: Repeat the same exercise, but using the figure to represent yourself, rather than a character from the book.

Activity 3: Reflections

Have the students pick one of the following prompts and write out their thoughts. Set a timer for 5 minutes and have them do a free-write, treating it more like a journal entry than a polished submission.

- What did you know about the model minority myth before reading the book? What do you know now? How does the model minority myth affect you?
activities

- How important is it to see yourself in a work of literature? What do you think it means to see yourself in this way? Why do you think representation in the media is important?
- Which author stood out to you most from the panel? Why?
- What would your ideal English class syllabus look like?

Activity 4: Looking Backward

South Asian Americans in the United States have a long history before these books were written. Some of this history is well-known; much of it is not. Let’s focus, for now, on some historical events that have had ripple effects on the South Asian American community at large. Research an event of American history that involved South Asians and write about a moment in these books that it reminds you of. Below are some suggestions of major events in South Asian American history. How do we see the threads of history being reflected in contemporary fiction?

- *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, 1923
- The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965
- 9/11

Aside from large historical events that have shaped the future of South Asians in America, there are also small moments that are not documented in official records. Microhistory is the genre of history that spotlights these smaller moments that focus on individuals or small communities. Often, we study microhistory through personal ephemera: photographs, journals, letters, and other objects never intended for public consumption. Comb through saada.org or thesouthasianamericans on Instagram and pick an artifact before answering the following prompts.

- What year is this artifact from? What was going on in the world and/or the United States during that time?
- What does this artifact make you think of?
- Who are the people behind the artifact? What does this moment of history tell you about broader historical happenings at the time?
Theoretical References

Many have done the work of advocating for a diverse classroom canon before me, and it is worth presenting the following annotated bibliography on this theory for teachers’ reference.


Researchers Bean and Moni argue that young adult fiction can help develop students’ critical literacy, partly because YA centers issues of identity so strongly. They point to the identity markers of race, gender, sexuality, and others that allow students to confront and interrogate societal norms and the liberatory potentialities that literature offers.


YA literature can be a site of empowerment for young readers, promoting personal growth, self-reflection, and social awareness. This article studies the relevance of YA literature to children’s own lives, allowing them to explore identity and diversity as well as critique social norms and gain a greater understanding of their place in the world.


Though academia has shifted away from the term “multicultural,” this article provides a good gloss about the benefits in exposing young children to multicultural literature. Children who read diversely develop more empathy and respect for one another, and integrating diverse literature into the classroom isn’t as hard as it might seem.


Welch explores the harms that the lack of representation in children’s literature can have on its readers, especially by reinforcing racial stereotypes and perpetuating white privilege. There should be a concerted effort in libraries and classrooms to seek out more diverse literature that promotes inclusivity and offers new perspectives.
Conclusion

This project is a direct response to the debate surrounding the pigeonholing of “multicultural literature” as too niche and therefore unable to offer any universal human truths. Literature that speaks to the experiences of minoritized communities in America has the delightful effect of opening up a reader’s world to alternate ways of knowing and being that do *not* stand in opposition to those ways of knowing and being one may glean from the Western literary canon. Rather, I propose we treat high school students as serious academics, capable of juggling myriad worldviews given to them by myriad books. I propose, too, that we bring the fun back to literary analysis. We do not need to bludgeon the meaning out of irony nor tear apart a metaphor in the service of gaining answers—the those who study literature know that books rarely give us answers. Instead, they simply give us better questions. Why, then, do we teach high school students that they must treat their books with the same scientific precision with which they treat their chemistry labs and their integration functions? Why do we not let students discuss how a book made them feel? When did we create a hierarchy of analysis over affect—without, of course, realizing that affect a form of analysis?