

# Understanding Cultural Diversity through Multicultural Literature

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## Abstract

This article focuses on Multicultural Literature as a response towards cultural diversity. Multicultural literature can be seen as one of the important tools to promote cross-cultural understanding in a culturally diverse world. In explaining these issues, the writer also discusses Stuart Hall and Amin Maalouf's concept of Identity. The writer argues teaching and learning multicultural literature benefits in changing or widening perspectives in critically viewing differences and identity. As it has been discovered that when students can relate global events to the themes, conflicts and characterizations found in multicultural literature helps them to better understand current world issues. Students therefore develop greater cognitive skills as they learn to engage with and critically evaluate the text that they read (Norton, 2009). Multicultural literature is in the end emphasized as one vital aspect that should be continually implemented in teaching literature that serves greater awareness in breaking down cultural barriers that is vital in what we often see in today's underlying conflicts.

**Keywords:** Amin Maalouf, Cultural Diversity, Identity, Multicultural Literature, Stuart Hall.

## Abstrak

Artikel ini membahas Sastra Multikultural sebagai tanggapan terhadap kondisi keberagaman budaya. Sastra multikultural dapat dilihat sebagai salah satu alat penting untuk mempromosikan pemahaman lintas budaya dalam keberagaman budaya. Dalam menjelaskan masalah tersebut, penulis juga membahas tentang konsep Identitas Stuart Hall dan Amin Maalouf. Penulis berpendapat bahwa pengajaran sastra multikultural bermanfaat dalam mengubah atau memperluas perspektif dalam memandang perbedaan dan identitas secara kritis. Dalam sebuah penelitian sebelumnya ditemukan bahwa siswa dapat menghubungkan peristiwa-peristiwa global dengan tema, konflik dan penokohan yang ditemukan dalam karya sastra multikultural yang kemudian membantu mereka untuk lebih memahami masalah yang terjadi di dunia saat ini. Oleh karena itu, siswa dapat mengembangkan keterampilan kognitif yang lebih besar saat mereka belajar untuk terlibat dan mengevaluasi secara kritis teks yang mereka baca (Norton, 2009). Sastra multikultural pada akhirnya ditekankan sebagai salah satu aspek penting yang harus terus dilaksanakan dalam pembelajaran sastra yang dapat memberikan kesadaran lebih besar dalam mendobrak sekat-sekat budaya yang vital dalam apa yang sering kita lihat terjadi pada konflik mendasar akhir-akhir ini.

**Kata Kunci:** Amin Maalouf, Keberagaman Budaya, Identitas, Sastra Multicultural, StuartHall.

## **Introduction**

Cultural diversity and the crisis of identity have become very much talked about in the modern world we are living in. Intersections between nations and cultures have increased due to a constant condition of high mobility either caused by political and economical turmoil or the advancing technology. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, sociologists began to speak about a new “crisis of identity”, because identity—once seen as a simple idea—was becoming increasingly hard to pin down. (Atkinson: 2015). Modernity had changed the way people associated with one another; the way people think and behave as a group, how they identify themselves as members of society—have then changed and are becoming a more complex notion. G.H. Mead (2015) highlights that the connection between the individual and society arguing that “an individual can only develop a true sense of identity in the context of a social group through interaction of others.”

This is becoming more and more problematic because differences then are stigmatized seen as labels attached to those who do not conform within the illusory categories in certain groups in a society. Nowadays we are not only seeing a world that is becoming more and more diverse, but also societies that are implementing conflicts such as ethnocentrism, discrimination, stereotyping, and prejudice where all are seen as the problematic core in responding to differences. The field of education can be seen as an important aspect in implementing positive views in understanding diversity. Multicultural literature as one of the genres taught to students can be seen as a vital role in delivering understandings and perspectives related to the complex matter of differences and identity.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Stuart Hall in his article *The Question of Cultural Identity* (2012) suggested that notions of cultural identity are no longer fixed. With significantly improved communications and increased mobility, traditional national, ethnic, class, and even gender identities have all but disappeared. So the post-modern self, he explains, has no stable inner core. It is not fixed in any way, but instead is formed and transformed continuously according to the ways that it is addressed or represented in society—becoming and being. This is a self in process, defined historically rather than biologically. (Hall in Atkinson: 2015).

Amin Maalouf in his book *In the name of identity* (1998) argues that if people cannot live their multiple belongings, if they constantly have to choose between one side and the other, if they are ordered to get back to their tribe, we have the right to be worried about the basic way the world functions. He believes that at the root of much of the world’s violence are tensions about identity and belonging. Reducing people’s identity to narrow categories, he explains, can lead to violence.

## Discussion

Multicultural literatures are works of literature that depicts problems contained in a multicultural society. Multicultural literatures are works of literature about the socio-cultural experiences of underrepresented groups. This literature includes those who fall outside the “mainstream” of categories such as race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and language. Multicultural literatures in the United States of America appeared in parallel with the emergence of movements that fought for equality and acknowledgements on diversity in the society. In the beginning of 1980s, the term multiculturalism as an ideology first appeared as an act of protest against the domination and hegemony of the WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) culture in various aspects such as in education, language, history, and cultural expression in mass media and literature.

Related to this matter, literature held an important role as an area to express and protests related to every crucial problem in a multicultural context. Immigrant and non-immigrant writers that came from different backgrounds (ethnicity, religion, language, race, culture, etc) brought various cross-cultural problems that they encounter in their motherland as well as in their new land. Those cross-cultural problems in multicultural literatures are matters concerning identity crisis, discrimination to a certain group, prejudices, stereotyping, essentialism, acts of superiority and inferiority, etc. These matters mentioned are in contradicting with the multiculturalism basic ideology, which is to respect and appreciate differences. In America multicultural literatures such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, etc. have been included in the school curriculum as an act to teach and promote multiculturalism. To this day multicultural literature develops widely not only in America but also in other parts of the world with more new writers emerging from various different backgrounds and stories such as Hala Alyan, Sairish Hussain, Susan Abulhawa, Celeste Ng, etc.

Multicultural literature helps global awareness; look critically at the world by portraying current cultural issues. This is why it is seen as an important media in learning and should be implemented in the educational system. When students experience the feelings and emotions of others through literature, they are encouraged to look critically at the world and gain a greater understanding of the global community (Monobe & Son, 2014). Multicultural literature to this day has grown rapidly as writers from different cultural, racial, national backgrounds have produces writings that portrays issues related to matter of diversity. This genre can be seen as a media used not only to show but to express their views as as problematic experiences living in a world that is increasingly becoming diverse.

Through these works of multicultural literature, people may find a better understanding of issue related to those complex matters such as how one is viewed and placed within a certain society.

By reading these works of literature may give people a broader perspective on humanity. Reading multicultural literature and reading about other cultures teaches differences and respect towards people who are different. People may gain valuable insights and develop empathy towards other people through reading. People may understand that prejudices, stereotyping, essentialisms, and discriminations towards a certain group or identity are unnecessary acts that could only bring separations.

### **Conclusion**

Students should be urged to read multicultural literatures because it could give them a better view in perceiving cultural identity and differences in their surroundings. Multicultural literature serves as a powerful tool in enabling a better understanding of both own culture and the cultures of others. It fosters positive self esteem, nurture respect empathy and acceptance among all. As it has been discovered that when students can relate global events to the themes, conflicts and characterizations found in multicultural literature helps them to better understand current world issues.

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