

## Abstract

### Building Cultural Competence Through Multicultural Fiction

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Cultural competence is a set of skills which is gaining recent attention as a tool for navigating a diverse American society. This study examines the purposeful instruction of select multicultural literature which can aid the construction of these frameworks and skills for mature students. To clarify the significance and relevance of building this set of skills, this study explores traditional literature classroom to reveal the often missed opportunities to build these life skills. I then address and define the concept of cultural competence, followed by a discussion of three novels selected to be applicable to this purpose: Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms*, and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. These novels are particularly well-suited to build cultural competence because of the deep and emotional connection that readers find to the texts. These stories are constructed in similar ways which promote heightened reader responses, utilizing the perspective of youth, time devices, and storytelling to engage the reader in an interactive and transformative reading experience. Combined with thoughtful instruction, multicultural novels like these hold the capacity to transcend their literary value and contribute to cultural awareness and social change. The resulting effect of purposefully studying these novels is a heightened ability to receive, process, and respond to multicultural stimuli. Students become enlightened

with academic knowledge; more importantly, they become empowered as culturally competent global citizens.



# Building Cultural Competence Through Multicultural Fiction

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by

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BUILDING CULTURAL COMPETENCE THROUGH MULTICULTURAL FICTION

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: Introduction.....	1
Classroom Literature and the Literature Classroom.....	6
Cultural Competence and Multicultural Literature.....	13
CHAPTER 2: Bridging Borders in <i>The Kite Runner</i> .....	21
CHAPTER 3: Reimagining History in <i>Solar Storms</i> .....	39
CHAPTER 4: Going Global with <i>The God of Small Things</i> .....	57
CONCLUSION.....	74
WORKS CITED.....	77

## Chapter 1: Introduction

The cultural components of America are shifting at a growing rate; the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that by the year 2042, “groups currently categorized as racial minorities ... will account for a majority of the U.S. population” (Hsu 1). What this means for all Americans is that the overlap and interaction of cultures is inevitable. This anticipated shift should be the catalyst needed for Americans to begin preparing for cross-cultural interactions. Ethnicities will come in to contact with one another more often in the business world, the classroom, and at the corner store; therefore, it is becoming imperative for individuals to learn culturally sensitive and receptive ways of communicating with people from other backgrounds.

The skills enabling successful communication across culture lines are developed over time by those receptive to the changing dynamics in the world. Students are in the perfect position for building these skills as they are preparing for their larger lives outside the world of academia. Educators have a responsibility to provide them the tools for successfully navigating the world beyond the classroom, and studying multicultural literature is an ideal means to begin building the foundations for cultural competence. This term is a fundamental concept; cultural competence is a multilayered set of skills which enable effective interactions with people from other cultures. Multiethnic literatures that are best suited for this purpose promote cultural awareness, are deeply engaging, and elicit empathy from readers.

Through purposeful study of the content of *The Kite Runner*, *Solar Storms*, and *The God of Small Things*, I seek to reveal how students of literature can benefit from the messages within the multicultural texts to become more culturally competent. This

thesis will identify the importance and explores value of these essential skills, and then explore how multicultural literature encourages the development of cultural competence. Laurie Grobman points out in her essay “The Value and Valuable Work of Multi-Ethnic Literature,” that it is the “mutually enriching connection between the political and the creative in a process of cultural specificity and cross cultural negotiation” (83) that engages the reader in both cultural and societal issues for meaningful reflection and application. Building these sensitivities are key elements of fostering cultural competence, and I examined three authors whose novels stimulate this growth within their readers. Though I am exploring only three works, this critical study is meant to be applied to a larger and widely varied body of multicultural literature and potentially incorporated into other disciplines.

To illustrate the potential of multicultural texts in the role of building cultural competence, I analyzed the work of Linda Hogan, Arundhati Roy, and Khaled Hosseini, whose contributions offer much to students, scholars, and the global community. These authors utilize similar mechanisms in their writing to reconstruct the historical perspective of their characters and cultures. In each of their novels, the writing mixes flashbacks of personal and historical pieces from the young characters’ lives with their present circumstances. As the characters reconnect with their cultures and learn life-changing lessons, the authors also extend this education for readers. Each author is fostering an open and accepting attitude toward difference as well as helping build the foundations for interactions with differing cultures. These texts are literary achievements which encourage strength and affirm identity for minority readers, while promoting the value of intercultural dialogue for all readers. In efforts to clarify the importance and

relevance of building this skill, this study first addresses the concept of cultural competence, as well as an examination of the traditional literature classroom. This is followed by a discussion of these three novels, with an argument that they hold the capacity to transcend their literary value and contribute to cultural awareness and social change.

Ideas are transferred through fiction. In fact, literature courses are a supplement to History, Social Studies, and lessons in other disciplines in both secondary and college classrooms. Students are exposed to various time periods in history, have a context from which to draw connections, and are often witnesses to injustice and social conflict through the works that they read. Multicultural fiction offers an even broader context than canonical British and American literature for students to build their understanding and frame their perceptions of the world. Richard Beach points out, “in responding to literature, students are experiencing characters’ complex, often inexplicable reactions to these events that defy rational explanations” (7); the experience that students have can actually transform into a process of building cultural competence through the quality of their responses to the material.

It is important to understand that fiction often elicits a very real response from readers, both emotional and intellectual; readers’ responses link them to the stories being told. Fiction does hold an imaginary element, though there are a multitude of stories rooted in reality where authors have painstakingly researched their writing; they strive to emulate the experience of a certain place, time, and people. Despite the fact that the characters and specific events might be imaginary, much of the remaining story details real events and circumstances. In effect, readers have a very real experience

within legitimate scenarios. Genevieve M. Bartol and Lenora Richardson note that, “Still, the subject matter is drawn from life. ... Thus, often the fictional world is no more unreal than the world we call ‘real’” (75). These works hold a more authentic truth than any standard non-fiction can offer. For this reason, it is important to evaluate what students are taught; more importantly, it is critical to examine what they have the potential to learn.

Through readers’ responses and the experiences that they have engaging with certain multicultural literature, it is possible not only to pass down facts and knowledge through texts but also to develop new frameworks for functioning within a diverse society. By expanding the range of multicultural texts purposefully studied in literature courses, students can build their cultural competence to navigate a global society. This process begins for students by being exposed to cultural values and landscapes that they would not otherwise have the chance to explore through meaningful textual interaction and discourse; they then have the opportunity to build the sensitivity necessary for respectful and effective interaction with individuals from cultural groups other than their own.

Among the choices in multicultural literature, there are some texts that are especially suited for this purpose; these works are distinct from texts which simply allow the reader to witness events from the sidelines and merely feel sympathy for the characters and circumstances. Instead, these are texts which are constructed to engage the readers in an active process with the characters; the audience is no longer merely witnessing the story but has become more involved in uncovering the events surrounding the characters. They have entered the pages and become absorbed in the

story and vicariously experience the culture through the characters. When this process is combined with purposeful instruction and critical analysis, it becomes the practical experience required to shape cultural competence.

The measure of literature to influence behavioral responses in readers has been documented in a variety of studies. Inger Bierschenk's 1997 research establishes that students who have been exposed to literature respond differently, more sympathetically, to situational prompts. When provided with only minimal exposure to varying scenarios, students altered their behaviors. She argues that "literature is a necessary instrument for perceiving the disparity of a society and for developing competence" (4). While she focused on societal competence, conceptualizing society and culture are interrelated; it stands to reason that with extended study focused on multicultural works, these specific student responses would also be affected based on this sort of exposure.

Because the literary realm transforms the way that readers perceive the world around them, it is a fitting means to reach cultural competence for students. Bierschenk does concede that schools cannot form students' competence; they can only provide the tools for its development and study. Her position on the matter is that "if literature is to have the educational function of preparing students for civilian life it is fundamental that the comprehension they have arrived at through fiction, that is, culture, can be transformed into adequate strategies of behavior in real life" (18). Students have a certain mental potential for developing cultural competence, and this can be enhanced through critical literary study.

Making these deeper connections requires careful planning and persistent study by educators to effectively guide classroom discussions. It certainly presents challenges

for educators as they “[challenge] students’ status quo discourses” (Beach 14), but students benefit in their comprehension as well as their aptitude to move forward and continue to apply the methodology for approaching interactions with other cultures. Aiming for cultural competence through multicultural literature in the classroom is the evolution of critical multiculturalism as a response to the changing needs of a culturally diverse American society.

### *Classroom Literature and the Literature Classroom*

Today’s classrooms are evolving to become more reflective of the changing face of United States society; however, the material being studied is not changing at the same rate. Literary canon debates have been taking place for the past few decades, rising in number and passion. Though this study is not focused on that debate, it is important to bring attention to the lingering disproportion of multicultural material in literature classrooms. It is a credit to the scholars committed to broadening the range of canonical material that more women and minority authors are being introduced to students’ courses of study. Their inclusion into mainstream curriculum began as an exercise in diversity, applying liberal theory to multicultural studies. While this allows students to access texts beyond the traditional Western variety, there is often limited space in the classroom made for multicultural material; it is often tokenized and confused for diversity. In an ideal sense, schools would promote diversity as understanding and acceptance of varied ethnic groups while not giving priority or preference to any one group. However, in these inadequate doses in the classroom, students are not accessing the full potential that multiethnic literature has to offer them.

Utilizing these texts can have a profound effect on students' attitudes; it holds the capacity to more deeply teach classmates about themselves and one another through sustained study (Beach 21).

Many students have encountered people from other backgrounds, but few have been reflective on their dealings with them. Professors Ruth McKoy Lowery and Donna Sabis-Burns note that "Many children enter first grade having spent their early years in a monoculture environment that mimics the attitudes and beliefs of their community" (51). It is often through literature that students have their first exposure to people from different cultural backgrounds. It is vital to the success of their cross-cultural navigation that they break out of the "ethnic encapsulation" (Banks qtd. in Lowery and Sabis-Burns 51) where many of them have begun their academic careers. Beyond their standardized education courses, it is also imperative that students be given preparation for interacting with individuals from varied cultures to prepare them for the new reality of our nation. Literature courses possess this capability but must begin expanding the present classroom literature selection to include works that are more representative of the collective American students.

It is the role and responsibility of educators to impart knowledge onto their students but also to prepare them for the diversifying world outside of academia. There is a growing body of research that demonstrates the benefits that multicultural literature has to offer students; despite this, some traditionalists firmly adhere to a Eurocentric canon. They remain rooted in the belief that these works are the foundations for a complete literary understanding and fail to recognize the literary potential that multiethnic pieces provide, nor do they see the potential these works hold for building

cultural competence. It is generally understood that students do not connect as deeply with material that is distant from their lives. Certainly, works from Shakespeare and Mark Twain offer much to literary study and hold universal themes for students to access, but they are so far removed from present day that the majority of students are inevitably detached from them. Minority students are even further distanced from the stories by their lack of shared background. However, all students would benefit from opening up their literary selection, melding the past with the present, and finding shared humanity across cultures through the reading and discourse that a culturally comprehensive curriculum would promote.

Regardless of their ethnicity, American students are largely being given an incomplete literary selection to help frame their knowledge and worldviews. They need to be presented with a literary selection more reflective of the changing cultural dynamics in society. Furthermore, they should be painted a more complete picture of history through the varied ethnic perspectives that have shaped it. All students should be reading broad samplings of global literature, giving each of them an opportunity to connect to the cultural contexts contained within the pages. Reed Way Dasenbrock explains, “multicultural and postcolonial literature [have] a real role to play in producing informed global citizens: the world is largely, and the United States is increasingly, a non-European place, and a carefully designed curriculum in literature can play a role in increasing our students' knowledge of the rest of the world” (697-698). Students of all backgrounds learn from multicultural literature, gaining an appreciation for the distinctions between cultural groups as well as recognition of the commonalities that all people share. The range of material allows for finding the similarities and the differences

among the characters—and thereby the cultures. Reaching between texts to find intercultural links and parallels between groups solidifies students' comprehension, with impact beyond just exploring one multicultural text alongside a larger volume of Eurocentric ones.

According to the Center for Learning and Teaching Literature, the top ten most commonly taught books in public high schools include: *Romeo and Juliet*; *Macbeth*; *Huckleberry Finn*; *Julius Caesar*; *To Kill a Mockingbird*; *The Scarlet Letter*; *Of Mice and Men*; *Hamlet*; *The Great Gatsby*; and *Lord of the Flies* (Applebee). The remaining 33 at the top of the list are all White authors, include only four women, and are all of European or Euro-American backgrounds. Academic Laurie Grobman is more optimistic about present college level material, noting the possibility of a few ethnic authors in possible 2006 reading lists (*Hybridity* 1-2). This is still an insufficient compilation of multiethnic authors. Despite the growing number of multicultural texts available, the majority of literature taught is still far more representative of the historically dominant race. This argument is not to be confused with liberal multiculturalism, which seems to be simply looking for the right ratio of ethnic writers in curriculum. Instead, this argument is seeking to combat token representations and confusing students with generalized cultural assumptions based on limited reading (*Hybridity* 14).

Scholars such as Bloom and Hirsch would argue against modernizing the canon, holding to teaching strictly traditional literature in basic studies courses. Those who follow Hirsch see a static collection of classic literature that students should become versed in, to equip them equally with a basic core of knowledge and understanding (Bell-Villada 488). This approach, however, does not recognize that societal dynamics

are changing, and students need to be equipped with a modernized and culturally broadened framework for understanding the world. Bloom's argument is equally outdated, viewing modern (and multicultural) works as lacking in their cultural and historical value; but his argument is flawed. For decades, students have been reading about aspects of history through classic literature, though these are the materials that are ethnically and historically deficient. Europeans have been continually painted in the most positive light: "The less attractive features of U.S. history are either ignored, are placed in the mouths of those critics whom he mocks, or are glibly exorcised by Bloom" (Bell-Villada 497-498). The Bloom method of selecting student literature is narrow, presenting history from the dominant point of view.

While some of these classic stories do touch upon broad societal issues, they offer only limited perspectives from people of other than European descent, nor do they make space for the recognition of more recent historical events. These "Great Books," as the traditional works are sometimes referred to as, do not always facilitate deeper connections to the present lives, circumstances, and interactions of the student population. These "Great Books" lack the relevance to today's students. This leaves them passively learning lessons and dispassionately taking away supposedly universal ideas. These texts do not rise to the scope of the challenge that educators have in preparing their students to be global citizens. The necessity of this global citizenry is evident through a glance at current demographics.

Today's classrooms are made up of more than 40% of students who are classified as minorities (Lowrey and Sabis-Burns 50); from this group, the cultures are varied and broad. It is too often that these minority students are reading about people of

Eurocentric descent which then “pass[es] on to generations of students Western virtues and ideas through study of the Great Books, [and] literary studies reinscribes hegemonic knowledge and social injustices” (“Value” 13). EuroAmerican students are not subject to this disassociation, because they are consistently reading about people more closely related to their own backgrounds. As a result, minority students are receiving subliminal affirmation of an unspoken legacy. Incorporating a balanced variety of multicultural literature into students’ studies is critical to combating the Eurocentric curriculum that has been ingrained in the American education system. Many curricula are adopting the inclusion of some multicultural texts, gradually adding a Toni Morrison or Richard Wright novel to supplement an otherwise Eurocentric list. As Beach points out, this provides only a narrow glimpse into the realm of the “other,” only “momentarily entertain[ing] new, alternative discourses and cultural models only to fall back on traditional, familiar discourses” (21). Just adding a few diversified texts is insufficient, and any purpose or progress is undone by dabbling instead of delving into the study of multicultural literature. More importantly, gaining cultural competence through literature can more effectively be achieved when accessing a wide and varied range of multicultural works.

It is the persistent study of literature from a variety of ethnic voices that will enable students to go beyond their curricular requirements and find skills that will serve their lives outside of the classroom. Wortis and Hall’s research on multicultural education supports diversifying the materials and methods in teaching, allowing greater opportunities for students to reach their potential as culturally competent individuals:

Multicultural education is inclusive rather than exclusive. It encompasses many dimensions of human differences. It affirms and validates each child's culture and background. It provides for the growth of positive self-esteem among all children and guarantees that each child will feel successful. By providing all children equal opportunity to learn, multicultural education gives each child a chance to reach her/his full potential. The ultimate goal of multicultural education is to develop children's ability to function competently within multiple cultures. (qtd. in Richards 48)

Cultural competence is an important part of the "full potential" found through the study of multicultural literature. It is a means not only to teach respect and sensitivity to other cultures through literary study, but it also affirms cultural identities for minority students. These elements create culturally conscious individuals who can more effectively engage in a diverse American society. The impact that these more successful interactions can have are boundless in business, personal, and casual relationships, as well as in promoting a sense of harmony among all global citizens.

Whether culturally isolated or immersed in a blended environment, students in the United States are connected in aspects of their American experience. Likewise, all students reading a spectrum of multicultural literature can collectively experience the unfamiliar and navigate their new understandings. It is a chance for students to find similarities and differences to their own experiences, regardless of their background. For minority students, reading a wide range of multiethnic literature gives them the opportunity to find connections to their own experiences instead of feeling continually on

the outside of their academics. Moreover, it pushes EuroAmerican students out of the familiar arena of literature that they have been traditionally exposed to. Dasenbrock articulates for readers:

Why then should we read multicultural literature? The best arguments for this do not depend on giving minority students writers in the curriculum to relate to, nor on making sure that the diversity of the world's population is represented in the canon. We should read multicultural literature because it's good for all of us, good for us in specifiable and specific ways. A work of genuine power will confront us with things we haven't confronted before. That confrontation—no matter what our ethnic identity may be—will cause us to come face-to-face with our own values in a way which will either cause those values to change or cause us to become more aware of them and more reflective about their value. (700)

The self-reflective process that is stimulated by multicultural literature then becomes the springboard for developing cultural competence. The task for educators begins with determining which multicultural literature to select for this purpose.

### *Cultural Competence and Multicultural Literature*

The concept of cultural competence has become popular in the last ten years, originating from growing interactions between people of differing backgrounds. It is an idea that has been discussed in various arenas, from how to build it to where to use it, but a clear definition is sometimes elusive. Being culturally competent has been confused with simply being knowledgeable about or open to other cultures; however,

these misconceptions limit the scope of the concept. Cultural competence is the ability gained after one has pushed comprehension to the next level, climbed the hierarchy of learning and applied their knowledge to cross-cultural interactions. Cultural competence is more than just an awareness of other cultures; it is certainly an understanding of their intricacies, but more specifically it is the ability to navigate interaction with cultures other than one's own. Diversity Training University International (DTUI) describes cultural competence as being comprised of four components: awareness, attitude, knowledge, and skills (Mercedes and Vaughn 32). Heightened levels of cultural understanding are possible through studying a variety of multicultural works at length; the enriched awareness of oneself and the larger world gained through the study of this material is the foundation for developing the attitudes and skills required for competent interactions with people from other cultures.

The interconnected components of cultural competence meld together, enabling individuals to meaningfully interact with a diverse society; true cultural competence is incomplete without accessing all four features of the concept. Competence is a more complex set of skills than basic categorization; simply being aware of individual and cultural differences is not enough to successfully navigate interactions between cultures. While some people may recognize differences, this alone does not provide the tools needed to appropriately engage with people of different cultural backgrounds. Likewise, though people may become aware that they also hold biases or attitudes about cultural differences, they may lack the ability to adjust or refine their behaviors to minimize the manifestations of these attitudes. These behaviors can be further complicated by the fact that people are often unaware of their hidden biases; this is the

knowledge that must also be built upon to become culturally competent. The first three components are then channeled into a set of skills that are fundamental tools used in communicating between cultures (Mercedes and Vaughn 36-37).

Bartol and Richardson explain that building cultural competence is a “dynamic process in which we engage... framing assumptions, knowledge, and meaning from a culture different than our own” (75). It requires people to “[step] outside one’s traditional value orientation” (Bartol and Richardson 75) in a way that multicultural literature can provide. Cultural competence is becoming a necessary skill for navigating societal interactions; without it, interactions can be limited, uncomfortable, and potentially offensive. Even people with good intentions may simply lack the skills and understanding for more meaningful communication. Purposefully studying cultures outside of the dominant norm opens a deeper capacity to understand, empathize, relate to, and engage with society. I propose that attaining cultural competence is made possible through reading multicultural literature that promotes cultural sensitivity through building awareness, holds a context that is immediately relevant to readers’ lives, and elicits an empathetic response by actively engaging its audience.

Multicultural literature that requires reader involvement is a potential primer to interactions within a diverse society. Recent research supports the idea that the focused study of this literature gives rise to exactly the thought processes and paradigms that are necessary for cultural competence. This is not an argument strictly against teaching texts from the traditional literature canon; instead, it is a call to reevaluate the scope and content of what is being taught, in efforts to broaden students’ worldviews and provide them with the tools relevant for their lives in a globalized American culture. The reading

of selected multicultural literature is more relevant to present circumstances and societal dynamics than the Eurocentric canon; this aspect is the beginning of a more active connection that is cultivated in readers as they encounter modern multicultural texts.

Developing successful cross-cultural skills comes from not only examining other cultures, but also by actively analyzing one's own culture and becoming self-aware of beliefs, biases, and behaviors. As readers look out and around into the cultural world that fiction has created for them, they involuntarily look inward to discover their own attitudes and actions. It is the culture in which one is raised that shapes his/her attitudes and approach to interaction, and when students are presented with other cultures in literature, they inevitably learn about pieces of themselves.

Today's American students are raised in a shared nation, though with different cultural upbringings. This diversity can be misleading; it is not everywhere that a balanced blending of cultures occurs. Often, the varied cultures of the United States are pocketed together in communities, having limited interaction with other groups. It is for this reason that building cultural skills through multicultural literature discourse poses a particular challenge in culturally heterogeneous classrooms. These discussions are vital to developing cultural competence, and these blended spaces are where students' growing skills can be gently tested when facilitated by a responsive and attuned instructor.

The focused study of multiethnic literature is certainly a challenge for educators, from channeling dynamic methods for delivering information to facilitating charged discourse. Students may demonstrate resistance to moving away from the safety of

literature that pushes them outside of their comfort zone. It is particularly Euro-American students who resist engaging in these discussions, as Beach reports “[they] may remain silent fearing the benefits of engaging in discussions are outweighed by the detriments, such as appearing racist or insensitive” (10); whereas “students of color were more likely to discuss their cultural experiences” (10) in discussions stimulated by the studied texts. Even the minority students demonstrated some reluctance to discuss extreme depictions of racism in Beach’s research. As mentioned, it then becomes necessary for students to look inward before they can effectively explore cultures and issues outside their immediate frames of reference.

Multicultural novels, such as the ones selected here, challenge those frames of reference and go beyond simply offering cultural information; they offer perspective on the truths that American students think they know. In telling character stories, the authors fill the space between non-fiction’s lines and give a more complete picture of the truth that students have been taught. Particularly in today’s American society, where the cultural currents are shifting at an increasing rate, it is imperative to individuals to have cultural context to formulate, process, and shape new paradigms for understanding. Literature gives readers a perspective in Linda Hogan’s *Solar Storms*: U.S. nationalist ideas are deconstructed through her retelling of a history not found in textbooks. Similarly, when the “War on Terror” was inundating American media, Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* emerged as a humanizing portrayal of the Afghan people. As Bartol and Richardson point out, “literature helps us to see life from different points of view, empowers us to reach across time, space, and cultures and enter another’s

world” (76). This helps people not only to know other people, but also to know themselves.

Global literature confronts, from the outside, the predominantly understood concepts that many readers already hold, taking them within to evaluate their subjectivities. These sorts of novels “create (a) place to think without dictating what to” (Maya Lyn qtd. in Beach) think. Readers are transported in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, learning of an entirely different social structure and its shaping historical forces. As students begin to know the characters, it enables them to meet the culture in its time and place of making (Beach 2). There is a need to be grounded in the larger present historical cultural forces, to contribute to the active process of becoming culturally competent. These novels shift the framework of traditional literature, and give all students something different from which to draw.

The works examined here by Roy, Hosseini, and Hogan are especially appropriate to utilize for this purpose. They each have been published relatively recently and are addressing issues that today’s American students have seen in their lifetimes. Furthermore, students have a higher likelihood of engaging with the texts due to their readability. Works that are too intricate, involving “complex plot development, use of symbolism, and shifting points of view... proved to be more difficult for students” (Beach 16), and result in “aesthetic resistance” (16). Texts that are easier to navigate become more accessible for students, and forge a path for meaningful reflection on their content.

These specific novels accomplish even more than providing cultural facts and frameworks; they elicit a valuable response from readers: empathy. Their construction draws readers in and invites them to share in the experiences of the characters while

building compassion and sensitivity to cultural issues. These well-crafted novels create a deeper connection between the reader and the protagonists, allowing readers to journey with the characters rather than watch them from the outside. Boler's research discusses this sort of "testimonial reading," in which readers engage in a process to "rethink his or her own assumptions, and to confront the internal obstacles as one's own views are challenged" (Beach 6). The readers experience their connection to these novels, which is almost inseparable from an actual lived experience. They thereby develop the ability to empathize with the characters rather than simply sit on the sidelines of the story. Foreign cultures are further demystified by this mechanism, and this facilitates a more authentic experience for the reader.

Evoking an empathetic response is accomplished in these novels through three primary ends: time devices, perspective of youth, and storytelling. By manipulating time, the authors have crafted a means to gain insight into the culture; but more importantly, the reader journeys with the characters through the conflicts and struggles in the novels. Uncovering the culture is like an unfolding mystery, further engaging the reader in the learning process. In their own ways, each of the main characters makes a return journey home which is an aspect of the time devices that these authors use; this mechanism by allowing readers to be familiarized with a potentially unfamiliar ethnicity as the characters become reacquainted with their history and culture. Secondly, each character's journey is woven through the perspective of youth. Readers that are novice to the other cultures are guided by these characters' naïveté, innocence, and inquiry. They follow through important parts of the characters' lives, allowing for a deeper opportunity to connect with these childhood stages and learn as the character does.

Finally, each author brings an aspect of storytelling to their novel. Students grasp the importance of passing down the culture and history through this mechanism; as receivers of the story they are reading, they also become part of that legacy.

Each of these methods reinforces the active process that readers go through by engaging them with these novels, creating the first step in acquiring the practical skills necessary for cultural competence. Through these novels, students create meaning for themselves for application to their own lives by: “[reflecting] on the text in the context of the external, verifiable factors so that the text appears to mirror those factors, is one way to manage the indeterminacy and create meaning for ourselves. . . . Consequently, our interactions with the text can instruct us and serve as a criticism of life” (Bartol and Richardson 76). The resulting effect of purposefully studying these novels is a heightened ability to receive, process, and respond to multicultural stimuli. Students become enlightened with academic knowledge; more importantly, they become empowered as culturally competent global citizens.

## Chapter 2: Bridging Borders in *The Kite Runner*

*The Kite Runner* is an artfully crafted example of the power and possibility of multicultural literature. A 2002 publication, the book is set in both Afghanistan and America—and as the main character traverses time and distance, the reader is transported alongside him. After immigrating to America as a young man, Amir is called back to his home country to rescue the son of his childhood friend from the danger and instability of a changed Afghanistan. Readers become engrossed in a universally appealing story while gleaning culturally specific knowledge along the way. Through this literature, they share Amir's journey without physically transporting themselves. *The Kite Runner* is a beautiful literary piece to study, for its aesthetic sake as much as for its value in teaching readers about culture. Because it accomplishes both ends, it can be an invaluable tool in the classroom. This chapter begins by highlighting the cultural education that readers receive through the story, followed by a discussion of the relevance of this novel to American students' lives. I then explore the mechanisms that create a deeply emotional and interactive connection between text and readers: youthful perspective, time devices, and storytelling. The structure of the novel adds to the power of its potential. The cultural understanding that comes with reading multicultural literature such as this is the first step towards cultural competence.

Through remembering a time of relative peace through his childhood, Amir aids readers in seeing the country's beauty and unique cultural aspects. These distinctive features are what maintain the novel's authenticity as a cultural narrative, despite holding universal themes. There is debate surrounding multicultural literature that appeals to common human themes; critics hold that readers' understandings of the

novels become set against their own frameworks of humanity and that nothing is gained toward the transmission of cultural understanding. Yet, it is *The Kite Runner's* more subtle depictions of the Afghan culture that make it such a powerful tool in shaping cultural understanding.

The novel offers vivid glimpses into a land that is considered foreign to most American students. Through Amir's memory, readers' senses become enlivened with Afghan surroundings:

We chased the *Kochi*, the nomads who passed through Kabul on their way to the mountains of the north. We would hear their caravans approaching our neighborhood, the mewling of their sheep, the *baaing* of their goats, the jingle of bells around their camels' necks. We'd run outside to watch the caravan plod through our street, men with dusty, weather-beaten faces and women dressed in long, colorful shawls, beads and silver bracelets around their wrists and ankles. (26)

The cultural backdrop is enriched through these details, giving readers realistic imagery to become absorbed in. Hosseini paints a picture of a thriving Afghanistan in a time of relative peace as a new point of reference for understanding Afghan existence.

Through Amir, Hosseini goes on to give readers a glimpse of seasons and celebration, continuing to give readers an insider lens with which to view Afghanistan and its people. There is honesty in what Amir remembers throughout the novel; he tells the details of summer and the restlessness that it brought:

In Kabul, it rarely rained in the summer. Blue skies stood tall and far, the sun a branding iron searing the back of your neck. Creeks where Hassan

and I skipped stones turned dry, and rickshaws stirred dust when they sputtered by. People went to mosques for their ten *raka'ts* of noontime prayer and then retreated to whatever shade they could find to nap in, waiting for the cool of early evening. Summer meant long school days sweating in tightly packed, poorly ventilated classrooms learning to recite *ayats* from the Koran, struggling with those tongue-twisting, exotic Arabic words. It meant catching flies in the palm while the mullah droned on and a hot breeze brought with it the smell of shit from the outhouse across the schoolyard, churning dust around the lone rickety basketball hoop. (108)

It is with more fondness that Amir remembers winter, and his initial memory alludes to the novel's title:

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 for the icy season. ...And kites, of course. Flying kites. And running them. ... I loved wintertime in Kabul. I loved it for the soft pattering of snow against my window at night, for the way fresh snow crunched under my black rubber boots, for the warmth of the cast-iron stove as the wind screeched through the yards, the streets. But mostly because, as the trees froze and ice sheathed the roads, the chill between Baba and me thawed a little. And the reason for that was the kites. Baba and I lived in the same house, but in different spheres of existence. Kites were the one paper-thin slice of intersection between those spheres. (49)

Amir's child-like enthusiasm and respect for his culture shines through his memory and through his otherwise straightforward prose. Through his voice, Hosseini details the beauty of the country as well as the spirit of the Afghan people. American readers are granted these images as a contrast to the harsher ones found in the headlines. Perhaps for the first time, many Western readers have a new way to understand the background, beliefs, and strength of the people of Afghanistan. Over the course of history, their country has been the site of territorial disputes and war. This has not, however, stifled the pride or dignity of its people: "The Hindi kid would soon learn what the British learned earlier in the century, and what the Russians would eventually learn by the late 1980s: that Afghans are an independent people. Afghans cherish custom and abhor rules. And so it was with kite fighting" (52). Afghan customs are further detailed later in the story with the intricacies of the *khastegari* tradition and the traditional ceremony in which Amir and Soraya are married (161-171). How Amir relays these culturally specific details allows readers inside the Afghan culture for an understanding of what the majority of Americans are unaware; the novel proves to be a cultural education for most readers.

Hosseini continues readers' education from cultural specifics to the people themselves. Amir takes care to credit the honor that his people value through the idealized depiction of his father, Baba: "Lore has it my father once wrestled a black bear in Baluchistan with his bare hands. I have imagined Baba's wrestling match countless times, even dreamed about it. And in those dreams, I can never tell Baba from the bear" (12). Amir reinvents Afghan individuals for the mainstream American reader, revisiting their respect and unity countless times in the novel. In the new American home that his

people find, Amir details how they maintain their identity through customs and community. This is evidenced particularly when Baba dies, and so many Afghans come to pay their respects: “They filled the parking spots at the mosque in Hayward. ... People had to drive three or four blocks north of the mosque to find a spot” (174). Baba is the center of Amir’s own understanding of himself as an Afghan man; when Baba passes away, it brings a rush of self-absorbed uncertainty in comparison to the proud Afghan man that his father was:

As words from the Koran reverberated through the room, I thought of the old story of Baba wrestling a black bear in Baluchistan. Baba had wrestled bears his whole life. Losing his young wife. Raising a son by himself. Leaving his beloved homeland, his *watan*. Poverty. Indignity. In the end, a bear had come that he couldn’t best. But even then, he had lost on his own terms. ... I realized how much of who I was, what I was, had been defined by Baba and the marks he had left on other people’s lives. My whole life, I had been ‘Baba’s son.’ Now he was gone. Baba couldn’t show me the way anymore; I’d have to find it on my own. The thought of it terrified me. (174)

Amir illustrates his own ethnic group, the privileged Pashtun class; though he also carefully crafts the honor and dignity of the marginalized Hazara people through his childhood friend Hassan and his father, Ali. Amir comes to learn the true history of the dispute between the Hazara and Pashtun people, which is an enlightening moment for him as well as many readers:

For years, that was all I knew about the Hazaras, that they were Mongol descendants, and that they looked a little like Chinese people. School textbooks barely mentioned them and referred to their ancestry only in passing. ... I read that my people, the Pashtuns, has persecuted and oppressed the Hazaras. It said the Hazaras had tried to rise against the Pashtuns in the nineteenth century, but the Pashtuns had 'quelled them with unspeakable violence.' The book said that my people had killed the Hazaras, driven them from their lands, burned their homes, and sold their women. (9)

The Hazara people are further distinguished through Ali and Hassan. Their positive attributes become a testament to not only Hazaras, but also to all Afghanis. Baba's love for Ali and Hassan erodes the class lines in their household; though he still betrays Ali by sleeping with his wife. Amir later repeats his father's betrayal in his actions surrounding Hassan, though Hassan is a picture of forgiveness. For Amir, he writes a letter of friendship as an adult; while for his mother, Rahim Kahn describes his kindness in welcoming her back into his life: "He took Sanaubar's hand in both of his and told her she could cry if she wanted to but she needn't, she was home now, he said, home with her family. He touched the scars on her face, and ran his hands through her hair" (210). Despite their mistreatment, both Ali and Hassan demonstrate unflinching loyalty, decency, and kindness. Their roles in the novel are offset by other characters, like Sanaubar or Assef, who help to minimize readers' tendency to make generalizations about the entirety of Afghan culture based solely on one set of people. Through each of the characters, Hosseini gives readers insight not only into Afghan

culture but also into the inequality and injustice within Afghanistan. Furthermore, through Amir's redeeming acts, he models ways to overcome ethnic divisions.

Hosseini also takes readers inside the social and political struggles of Afghanistan through the class division and regime changing, adding in the human elements for students' consideration. Americans largely lack a comprehensive understanding of other countries' histories; *The Kite Runner* offers a loose timeline to fill in their gaps and broaden their understanding of the people. Hosseini has crafted a layered meaning, through the characters and their relationships, for the larger afflictions of Afghanistan. The New Historicist critic Mashael Al-Sudeary highlights these unmistakable meanings: "As the personal and political intertwine in the narrative, Amir's tragic relationship with his father and Hassan becomes symptomatic of the political struggles in Afghanistan. ... Amir and Hassan's and Amir and Baba's distorted relationships become representative of the social and religious struggles of the country" (243). The betrayals and sacrifice in the interpersonal relationships run parallel to the events taking shape in the country.

The history offered in *The Kite Runner* gives readers cultural perspective and a brief historical overview of Afghanistan, but also addresses its more recent events with the Taliban. Readers are taken back with Amir, as he remembers "[t]he shootings and explosions had lasted less than an hour, but they had frightened us badly, because none of us had ever heard gunshots in the streets. They were foreign sounds to us then. The generation of Afghan children whose ears would know nothing but the sounds of bombs and gunfire was not yet born" (36). It is years later, and after much instability and uprising, that the Taliban take power. As Rahim Khan tells it, it was first a nationally

celebrated occurrence; then “A few weeks later, the Taliban banned kite fighting. And two years later, in 1998, they massacred the Hazaras in Mazar-i-Sharif” (213). Through reliving Amir’s memories with him, readers gather the legacy and loss of Afghanistan.

Particularly in the present time, this novel holds powerful potential for students. Allen Webb’s research revealed that “Identifying with characters from contemporary literature by a living Middle Eastern writer was transforming their understanding and building a bridge between American and Palestinian experiences” (81). This novel emerged at a time when the American media was flooding viewers with coverage of the “War on Terrorism,” giving a distorted image of the region. Webb points out that “Given the war and American occupation, examining the situation in contemporary Iraq is a natural and relevant part of reading Middle Eastern literature. Of course there is a deluge of information about Iraq; most of it emphasizes the perspective or experience of Americans” (83). The media coverage of the Middle East has showcased violence and destruction, leaving many Americans with a limited frame of reference for their understanding of the region.

These media images are not so far removed from the stereotypically portrayed Middle Easterner from Hollywood movies of the last two decades. The Islamic religious fundamentalist has been villainized particularly in Hollywood, making a larger gap in the understanding of the Muslims worldwide, not just the inhabitants of the Middle East. Unfortunately, these are the venues that many American students have to construct their cultural impressions and interpretations of Middle Eastern people. The generalized views of the Middle East do not separate one country from the next, and do not take into account the individuals living there; they have long been masked by the

misunderstanding of their culture. Despite the often negative reflections of the Middle East in these arenas it is perhaps, at least in part, the media coverage of the region that attracted so many readers to the novel.

*The Kite Runner* has provided a contradiction to the previously held assumptions about the Middle East and its people mentioned above. It has become an alternate lens with which to view this part of the world. For students who may not remember a time when war was not a part of the Middle East, it becomes a vital tool for removing the fear and mystique of a largely misunderstood region. The images and impressions American students have been receiving are “distort(ing) the lives and realities of Middle Eastern people” (Webb 85). Popular American opinion of the citizens of these Middle Eastern nations is being subtly molded to encompass aggression and hatred. This novel is an opportunity for American students to consider the humanity behind the media hype.

This novel became a bestseller nearly overnight, and sold more than four million copies worldwide in its first three years of publication. This mass appeal speaks to the power that this text holds, where literary scholars such as Mashael Al-Sudeary are reporting on its potential to break through stereotypes and build bridges across cultures: “Hosseini has enraptured readers not only in the West but all over the world, who no longer flinch at the name of Afghanistan, but are striving to be familiar with and sympathetic to its multitudinous problems and conflicts” (247). Al-Sudeary goes on to say that the novel “rectifies the narrow views of the West and opens up new vistas for the East” (247). Timothy Aubrey echoes these sentiments: “*The Kite Runner* seems to only activate the desire to overcome or elude partisan, ethnic, religious, and national divisions” (26) It has been furthermore celebrated for eliciting powerful responses from

readers as well as holding common themes to which the general public can relate such as identity, self-discovery, family, and power.

Through *The Kite Runner*, American readers are given a brief historical outline of Afghanistan that had not been previously told in fiction (khaledhosseini.com), allowing a larger context of understanding for the seemingly continual wars in the region. The countries have long been sought after by outside powers for numerous reasons, and finally, readers are able to see the real victims. While some have hailed the novel for its insightful portrayal of Afghanistan's recent history, others have cited its failures to provide a complete picture of the twenty years that it spans. These critics argue that the history is incomplete; it leaves out relevant culminating details during the time period when Amir immigrated to America. It does not detail the rise or the reason behind the Taliban, and a swayed perspective is the result. A more complete cultural education and understanding would include these missing details. In a book which arguably aims to break through stereotypes and misconceptions, "an unrealistic, demonizing portrait" is painted of the Taliban, which "de-emphasizes the historical conditions that help account for their emergence" (Aubrey 34).

However, in some collective acknowledgement of the incomplete picture *The Kite Runner* reflects, Aubrey argues that "many (Americans) appreciate Hosseini's novel for offering a digestible history of Afghanistan from the 1970's to 2001 and for describing some of the country's cultural, social, and religious practices" (27). As a re-introduction to the country, Hosseini's novel accomplishes the transmission of a concise history for reflection. Providing this relevant background information is essential for students to break through the stereotypes and misrepresentations they are subject to, "Reading

Middle Eastern literature, learning about the culture and history, and thinking critically about the representations of Middle Eastern people helped us become more savvy viewers [of media]" (Webb 86). *The Kite Runner* offers an alternative means of learning more about the true nature and circumstances of the people of that region; given a historical context of war and injustice, American students finally have the opportunity to gain understanding of the people who have lived through these times. Reading this text also enables readers to become more aware of the inconsistencies with their socially constructed frameworks as they are presented with the realities of the world, engaging them in meaningful interaction with the text.

The construction of the novel also enables a deeper connection between readers and the main character. The readability of *The Kite Runner* makes it thoroughly accessible to all readers, and the ease with which they move through the pages increases the engagement they have with the text. Readers are first introduced to the adult Amir, but through his memory, meet his childhood likeness. The young Amir is especially valuable in guiding readers through cultural comprehension. There is something universal about the childhood experience; whether it is an understanding of growing pains or a general inclination to reach out to the naïveté and innocence of youth, readers connect to children in literature. The child character is an ideal vessel to transmit the larger ideas of perception and understanding.

Through a child's eyes, the reader is able to perceive the Afghan world, for all its wonder and construction. Amir acknowledges the social and political circumstances as the state of being, because it is all he has ever known. It is when circumstances and conflicting emotions enter into this equation that the reader moves with him as he tries

to make sense of the world. His actions are the result of social conformity and his own cowardice, but the reader forgives the child for not knowing better. He is the “perfect” candidate for the crime; his inaction at the life-changing moment is understandable when viewing the fear through a child’s perspective. Furthermore, it is his childish reactions and retaliations that readers forgive when he cannot face Hassan. It is also through his immaturity that readers see the seedlings of the larger societal issues in Afghanistan; through patterns of power structures and learned behaviors, the status quo is intact and prejudice is reinforced. Readers find, maybe for the first time, a real understanding of the inequity in the country through Amir’s eyes.

*The Kite Runner* is primarily told from Amir’s perspective, and the majority of the first half of the novel is his memory of the past. By intertwining the past with the present, he keeps readers intrigued, seeking to find out how the story will unfold. A pleading call from his father’s best friend, Rahim Khan, pulls him backward in time, reliving the past that has haunted his adult years. Amir’s flashbacks plainly lay out the events that have culminated to the present, outlining both his life and the history of Afghanistan. Hosseini’s simple narrative style lends itself to credibility; the straightforward detail is not overly blurred by emotion, and therein lies one of its fundamental strengths.

The story is easy to follow while remaining engaging; the foreshadowing alludes to the past and present, and its flashbacks pull the readers deeper in with each trip backward. Learning that the day of Amir’s victorious kite fighting was the last time he would see Hassan’s smile for many years (67) is a moment that leaves readers wondering what happens next, urging them forward through the story. Amir’s memory of Rahim Khan’s words echo in his mind throughout the novel, “there is a way to be good

again” (2, 192, 226, 310, as well as in readers’ minds knowing that Amir has done something terrible. As the novel weaves back and forth in time, it creates an element of mystery that grabs readers’ attention and does not let go.

Within the frame of the book and the direct experiences in Afghanistan, some historical details are perhaps intentionally left out. Amir’s removal from his own nation and culture is evidenced by his disorientation upon returning. Despite the linking of past and present through this journey, Amir does not understand, nor does the general American reader, how the situation in his home country has become so extreme. Perhaps this reaction is the more relevant one for outsiders to conceive Afghanistan’s present circumstances; even people who resided through the emergence of the Taliban are at a loss to rationalize the actions of the extremist group. This is another way that readers can identify with Amir, because he is also an outsider looking in to his own country through his return.

Traveling back to the country of which Amir wanted to “bury his memories” (129) of, readers witness the devastating consequences of the sociopolitical transitions of Afghanistan through his eyes. They are given a comparative picture of the Afghanistan of Amir’s childhood as opposed to the present day. Amir’s guide warns him that, “Kabul is not the way you remember it” (244); though Amir is still taken aback by what he finds upon returning. He shows readers the ruin of the city:

Jadeh Maywand had turned into a giant sand castle. The buildings that hadn’t entirely collapsed barely stood, with caved in roofs and walls pierced with rocket shells. Entire blocks had been obliterated into rubble. ... A sadness came over me. Returning to Kabul was like running into an

old, forgotten friend and seeing that life hadn't been good to him, that he'd become broken and destitute. (246)

Despite the recognition of Afghanistan's despair, there is hope in Amir's return home. Nejme Khalil-Habib describes the theme of returning in Arabic literature as a national experience, one of "comes to be seen as a means of resistance and challenging oppression" (88). For those exiled from their homes, Afghanistan remains alive in their hearts; Amir's journey is the realization of the collective cultural dream of returning. As Khalil-Habib goes on to point out, for the Arabic people, the returning motif is particularly significant:

The concept of "Return" throughout this literature manifests itself in various ways including the spiritual return (as manifested in dreams and aspirations); the literal, physical return; an individual's return (a "Return" on the basis of family reunions); the "Return" as a result of the occupation of Gaza and the West Bank after the war of 1967; and the "Return" as a result of the peace process after the "Oslo Accords." (88)

The importance of this theme is deeply rooted in the culture's history, and Hosseini transfers this to readers in this novel.

For Amir, his return journey is also symbolic of his quest to atone for the sins of his past. After his memories recount his mistakes in making Hassan his sacrificial lamb (77), he sets out to "*be good again*" (2) by finding his nephew to save him from a life certain of misery. Amir once betrayed Hassan; his actions paralleled the injustices that Pashtuns were laying on all Hazara people. The parallel between the personal and political that Al-Sudeary discusses is deepened by the revelation that Hassan and Amir

are half-brothers; the fact that they have the same blood is of further significance as a lesson for students in shared humanity. It is Amir's decision to rectify the injustice that he committed against Hassan, as well as the parallel it holds to the greater injustices the Pashtuns committed against Hazaras which connect his actions to the Afghan legacy of returning.

These time devices serve a dual purpose, also helping to evoke the nature of the story being told. In this novel, storytelling becomes the underlying aim as the theme recurs. As an author who was raised with the foundations of the oral tradition, this has clearly influenced Hosseini. He has incorporated the essential principles of passing stories on through this novel: capturing the past for future generations and revealing lessons learned for teaching. Whether familiar with this aspect of literary study or not, the readers are left feeling as if they have had life lessons impressed upon them, like they have been entrusted with the secrets of the culture to treasure and pass down.

Furthermore, Amir revisits the concept of stories and their telling repeatedly throughout the book. *The Kite Runner* has been paralleled to the Persian collection that Hosseini repeatedly refers to in the story, *The Shahnameh*. This collection of hero stories is what seems to define Hassan and what Amir always feels he falls short of. As Al-Sudeary points out, "As a historiographical novel, *The Kite Runner* necessitates that its reader be familiar with the important folklore and cultural concepts that work toward fostering the wrong sorts of power relations in Afghani society" (236). Amir reads and tells these stories to an attentive Hassan: "Read it again" (*The Kite Runner* 25). Hassan is so moved by these tales that he tries to gift the book to Amir, and later he names his son after one of the great heroes, Sohrab. Amir himself aspires to be a writer and tells

his own stories to Hassan as a child. It is actually through the telling of his entire tale that he discovers his true feelings and builds the strength required to change his behaviors, a lesson valuable for readers and applicable to gaining cultural competence.

The emotion that *The Kite Runner* evokes, in part, is a reason for finding the universality critical to building cultural understanding. Aubrey's study on the popular American responses to the novel supports the connection between identification, empathetic response, and cross-cultural unity: "Hence, emotion serves as an instance of cross-cultural continuity and as the means of apprehending and assessing its own unifying character" (30). He refers to the empathy as "mimetic," (30), but nonetheless valid. It is important to note that these universal feelings are culturally distinct because of their difference, but united in that human experience is paralleled. It is actually the difference that elicits the powerful and sustained response: "the book's perceived transcendence, its ability to cross the borders between nationalities and ethnicities, seems to depend for American readers on its palpable evocation of an unfamiliar setting" (Aubrey 26). Its entire construction, geography to content makes it familiar and unfamiliar simultaneously for the readers. The unfamiliarity is where their cultural learning is stimulated, but the familiarity is what breeds identification with the main character.

These constructs further the feelings of identification to empathy; readers move from "it could be me" to "it is me," connecting to their own faults and failures. It is more than a passive witnessing that occurs within readers as they "do not imaginatively inhabit Amir's experiences in escapist fashion; they use the novel to recast and

disambiguate their own experiences” (Aubrey 31). Aubrey goes on to describe the work that this process requires:

In contradistinction to the strawman conception of universality as a product of insufficiently contextualized interpretive approaches, readers’ assertions of universality often seem to be the product of empathy energized dialectically by the tensions and contradictions that the readers are required to negotiate in their efforts to identify with characters who inhabit a culture that they find radically different from their own. (28)

It is no wonder that the reading of *The Kite Runner* has been widely documented as an exhaustive and “intensely emotional” (Aubrey 29) one. As Amir moves through his own journey toward forgiveness, readers also find hope for their own shortcomings. They understand Amir’s choices as “deeply awful, but deeply forgivable,” (31) and can find catharsis for their own failures through the journey they have undertaken with Amir. The character’s redeeming actions have changed the shape of his behaviors, and for readers identifying with him, this has a powerful resonance.

This manner of reading and learning with the character encourages “testimonial reading.” This process requires a conscious decision on the readers’ part to call into question their own perspectives, attitudes and beliefs; it also is a commitment to breaking through them as their paradigms and understandings shift (Daly 217). This undertaking is largely attributed to the readers’ identification with the character. Because readers have been drawn so deeply into Amir and his world, he has been lifted from the pages and put into the authentic space of students’ realities. In this, the readers find their own connectivity specifically to the guilt he has over the wrongs in his

life. This is the critical connection in this novel which allows readers to identify and find universality with the issues Amir faces. Furthermore, this universality is this novel's key to unlocking cultural awareness and understanding.

As evidenced, this novel is suitable for laying the groundwork for building cultural competence. In accessing such a recent and relevant book, students are touching some of the most important issues of their time. By breaking through stereotypes, students are able to uncover their own predisposed beliefs, attitudes, and biases. After comprehending the fundamentals that *The Kite Runner* artfully lays out, students can intensify their learning experience by analyzing their responses and uncovering larger social and systematic issues. It is the next steps of discourse and discussion which will further stimulate the sustainable skills of cultural competence. Aubrey points out the multiple opportunities that students have to access this heightened level of competence:

If not in the tragic narrative itself, then in their own compassionate reaction to it, many readers find a self-validating basis for hope—one that posits their participation in a purportedly universal and unifying affective response as a nonpolitical solution to the ethnic hierarchies and antagonisms that the novel, in order to elicit this response, presents as painfully intractable. (37)

Their emotional responses serve to bind the cultural education that *The Kite Runner* provides to the real life application of their attitudes, responses, and behaviors in future cross-cultural interactions.

### Chapter Three: Reimagining History in *Solar Storms*

*Solar Storms* is set on somewhat familiar ground for American readers, but through the protagonist, they are offered an alternate view of the world they think they know. Students who grew up learning the standardized American history curriculum often do not consider the lens of colonialism through which they are looking. The issues raised in this novel are alarmingly current as students are forced to deconstruct the Eurocentric realities and teachings to uncover new truths. *Solar Storms* follows Angel, a seventeen year-old girl who returns to the Native American land and people that she was taken from as an infant. The American government had removed her from her extended family's custody after she was physically abused by her mother, and after spending her life feeling lost and disconnected, Angel sought out her family in search of her own identity. What she finds is not only herself, but the legacy of her people and a desire to reestablish the natural balance between the land and people of her home at Adam's Rib. I begin this chapter by discussing the cultural aspects that readers learn from this text along with the importance of its study. Furthermore, by utilizing a youthful perspective, time devices, and storytelling, *Solar Storms* becomes an affecting story for students to begin building their cultural competence.

Though this novel was written in 1995 and based upon the events in North America from 1940 through the 1970s, it offers dramatic insight for readers into the history that many of them grew up learning. The story revisits the past in remembering the Canadian government's seizure of Cree Lands in the 1940s, though the people never agreed to this. More specifically, the story is loosely based on the Native American struggle as the Canadian government began manipulating the environment to

harness the energy of the river system surrounding Hudson Bay through the Hydro-Québec Project (Castor 157). These Western decisions had devastating effects on the Cree people, their land, and their livelihood. *Solar Storms* presents the aftermath of the generally celebrated Western decisions to expand westward and industrialize, and provides a thought provoking narrative from which students can build their cultural competence.

Furthermore, the Native American perspective is one that mainstream American students have not often encountered, largely because this literature has been left out of literary collections; this is in part due to the fact that much of what constitutes the Native American story is in a form difficult to capture on paper. The oral tradition served to pass Native American stories, traditions, and heritage down from generation to generation, and they were not easily or often written down. Literature from the indigenous American people had been muted for years due to the effects of colonialism. Jack Forbes points out that, “Colonialism and conquest interferes with traditional literature, to the point of destroying it or forcing it underground. It makes fun of it, shames it, ossifies it, museumizes it, stereotypes it, classifies it, romanticizes it, and reduces the tradition to impotency” (19). Native American Literature had historically been distorted or denied until the relatively recent past.

Texts like Hogan’s *Solar Storms* have much to offer in the way of filling in these gaps in history and education. The reader’s risk in reading these works is falling into generalizations and stereotypes. James Ruppert discusses:

Some students, especially non-Native ones, wanted to use the works to build up paradigms about cultural values. Too often these attempts were

motivated by a desire to criticize Western civilization. Building on stereotypical ideas about nature and spirit, some students wished to know more about tribal culture and to move quickly past the text and the writer to some abstractions and representations of Native culture. (113)

*Solar Storms*, however, is constructed in a way that recognizes the distinctions between various Native American tribes while capturing their unity in the continuing struggles the groups face.

Hogan stresses the unity of a dislocated people as she recognizes the characters' unique tribal backgrounds. Having been pushed off their lands over the course of time, the people at the fictionalized region of Adam's Rib were a collection of various tribes:

The first women at Adam's Rib had called themselves the Abandoned Ones. Born of the fur trade, they were an ill-sorted group. Some had Cree ancestors, some were Anishnabe, a few came from the Fat-Eaters farther north. Bush, the woman who floated in the canoe near Fur Island on the day I returned, was a Chicksaw from Oklahoma. (28)

Many tribes also come together in the northern lands of the Fat Eaters (Beautiful Ones) in a unified coalition against the hydroelectric dam. Like the real Hydro-Québec project, the dam and the preceding river diversion had destroyed much of the ecosystem and left many Native people homeless due to the resulting flooding and disruption of their livelihoods. Angel, Bush, and Dora-Rouge joined dozens of other Beautiful Ones, and amassed a "grassroots" (308) sort of following of other tribespeople: "They'd come through waters and forests to help us" (308). This included Arlie Caso House, "a short,

strong Ojibwa man” (308) who reflected the further unity of Native Americans; he was inspired by the Apache leader Geronimo, and brought this Apache-inspired guidance to the growing movement. Though united in purpose, each character’s uniqueness and individuality is magnified by his or her tribal lineage. The characters’ distinctions serve to counter generalizations about the collective Native American people.

The landscape of *Solar Storms* is of equal importance for building competence; it is not the background for the story, but woven into it. Central to the cultural understanding of Native American beliefs and values, the environment is a critical aspect of the story. Hogan brings it to life with detail and descriptive passages:

Sometimes now, I see the island as it was then, how the vines indoors grew red that autumn and fell to the floor, and how I swept them away. Those hungry, reaching vines that wanted to turn everything back to its origin—walls, doors, a ladder-back chair, even a woman’s life. They wanted to cover it all and reclaim it for themselves. (73).

Hogan brings life to objects considered inanimate to further the connection that the characters have to their environment. As described by Laura Virginia Castor, Hogan integrates the living and non-living, bringing emotional meaning to all of them for the reader:

Hogan animates the walls with feelings of grief. She describes the windows with a reference to elements of nature that lack direct emotional content but that nevertheless are fused into a layer of ice on the physically cold windows. The coldness of the window glass, perhaps because it is represented in its spare, descriptive sense, becomes infused in the

reader's imagination with emotional coldness as well. This sense of strong feeling is reinforced in Hogan's simile of the personified tree branches that remind the reader of human arms capable of expressing a variety of feelings, including anger and fear of freezing to death in the cold. (164)

The land itself is just as important as the inorganic objects that Hogan brings to life. The connection that Native Americans have to the land is critical for understanding their belief structure. Furthermore, it is the land that brings life to the characters, and so it is just as central as they are to the story. Castor describes the land as a “place as a center rather than a background for the text ... is nonetheless relevant for understanding *Solar Storms* in that it provides an opening for culturally Western readers to understand the more complex, indigenous perspective developed by Hogan” (161). This understanding is critical to perceiving the Native American belief in balance that the novel stresses.

Angel is learning the ancient ways of her people, in connecting to and respecting the environment. Through the memories recounted and the present events of the novel, she begins to see the differences between the Western culture and her newfound Native American culture:

The Europeans called this world dangerous. . . . Their legacy, I began to understand, had been the removal of spirit from everything, from animals, trees, fishhooks, and hammers, all things the Indians had as allies. They'd forgotten how to live. Before, everything lived together well—lynx and women, trappers and beaver. Now most of us had inarticulate souls, silent spirits, and despairing hearts. (180-181)

As she learns her heritage and marks its differences from mainstream culture, she offers the reader a perspective into the fundamental beliefs of the Native American people.

It is furthermore a concern among critics that while Native American literature might be by and about the people, Native Americans are not the primary audience.

Forbes raises the point that:

In the works of modern Native American writers ... it is clear that it is not easy to be an Indian writer writing for Indians. Few Indians, aside from university students, have probably ever seen most of the novels produced by these writers, let alone read them. Of necessity, native writers producing novels have to write them in such a way that they will be attracted to an English-language audience which is predominantly non-Indian. (22)

It is precisely for this reason that mainstream American students should be reading these works; the authors are extending an invitation to outsiders to enter into their world, and if willing, learn something from their experience there.

Native American literature gained popularity in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, being published in greater numbers compared to years previous. With rising numbers of Native Americans in publication, it seemed that they were finally being recognized in the literary arena. N. Scott Momaday's 1969 Pulitzer Prize for *The House Made of Dawn* seemed to open doorways for these authors, but this has not necessarily translated into an enlightened general American perception of First Nations people.

There may be a demand for multicultural materials in schools across America, but only limited gains are truly accomplished if they are not delivered effectively.

Despite the momentum of Native American literature in recent years, the stories captured in these works have failed to traverse across curriculum lines. American students are still primarily presented with a Eurocentric version of conquest of the New World and the associated victories of the original immigrants. It is perhaps because of their ineffective usage of the material that it fails to stay focused as literature of difference, works that not only allow insight into another culture and their set of values, but also into a rewritten Western history.

The mainstream views of early American history entail conquest and endurance as colonists fought against forces that opposed their freedoms. It is generally understood that the European settlers rose against the British and firmly rooted into their new land. Their survival depended on their ability to adapt; as they saw it, their ability to thrive depended on acquiring more land and wealth. *Solar Storms* contradicts these colonial ideas of triumph, providing another way of perceiving success, survival, and the world. Castor raises the point that this novel “can be read as an important critical work that challenges the dualism characteristic of Western thinking in the past five hundred years, and, in some cases, indigenous strategies of cultural survival as well” (160). Readers are afforded the opportunity to expand their cultural and world views through experiencing this book.

With an invigorated movement to establish a more accurate picture of Native American history in relation to European conquest, this novel emphasizes the juxtaposition of EuroAmerican and Native American worlds. This novel calls into

question the history learned by students in their primary textbooks, and it can offer an alternative lens with which they can perceive the construction of the world in which they live. It is novels like Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms* that challenge American readers to deconstruct what has been presented as history and reexamine the Western mentalities and beliefs that they hold. In her article "Native American Women: Our Voice, the Air," Hogan describes a Native American "vitalized cultural identity" (1) which pushes forward understanding the present world in terms of the old. Castor affirms that mainstream readers benefit from the more readily available Native American texts that this invigorated identity has given rise to: "*Solar Storms* ... provides an opening for culturally Western readers to understand the more complex, indigenous perspective developed by Hogan" (161). Hogan addresses some of the gaps in Western history books by providing the "other" side to the stories told in American classrooms.

The significance that the novel has for the present moment is invaluable as a learning tool toward understanding the cultural legacy and values of the Native American people. The novel makes a direct connection between the immediate realities that students understand to the new information that they are receiving; *Solar Storms* conflicts with their preexisting notion of truth and reality in the history it rewrites. Castor argues that as Hogan's "writing builds empathy, in terms of imagery, characterization, event, and context, for issues of direct concern to Native readers, and it provokes readers, no matter what prior knowledge we bring to the text, to ask whether we, too, might have a stake in the issues with which her characters struggle" (160). It does more than pique their interest; it engages their reality and allows them to immediately begin

interacting with the story. Students engage quickly as the familiar ground of their home becomes transformed into a reality that is anything but alternate.

The novel is set in the northern part of North America where the wilderness still has some claim to the land. Students are reminded of the roots of their nation; the origins of America were forged through the vast expanse of natural territory. Today in the United States, much of this natural state has been swallowed by industrialization, overtaken by modernization. Students are witness to a climactic moment in this struggle through Angel's eyes:

He spoke softly but there was an urgency to what he said. They had heard about plans to build a dam, a reservoir. ... In the first flooding, the young man said, they'd killed many caribou and flooded the land that people lived on and revered. Agents of the government insisted the people had no legal right to the land. No agreement had been signed, he said, no compensation offered. Even if it had been offered, the people would not have sold their lives. Not one of them. (57)

Students can recognize the contrast between what once was and what European hands have made.

With the rising concern of environmental issues entering students' present consciousness, *Solar Storms* gives a stark reality, showing what's left of what once was. Walter C. Fleming suggests that "Non-Indians are turning to more and more traditional native peoples for answers regarding the fundamental questions regarding Mother Earth" (75). Americans look to Native Americans for answers to the environmental crises the world is facing; however, *Solar Storms* does not offer a simple answer to

undo the damage done. Instead, it presents the cultural beliefs and framework of the Native American existence which maintained the harmony of the natural world. Readers come to understand that there are alternate ways of thinking and viewing the world. Furthermore, Hogan crafts the connection and dependence that the people have on the land and reveals that its destruction is equivalent to destroying the people and their culture. By the same token, Linda Hogan provides an even bolder lesson for students in the alternate worldview she presents, priming them for cultural competence.

Besides eliciting an immediate sympathetic response, Angel is accessible in her youth and her background. She has also grown up with Westernized interpretations of the world, though she is disillusioned and alienated. She provides a number of universal emotions from which readers can draw: possessing uncertainty and insecurity in her adolescence, suffering from parental abandonment, and feeling a general loneliness. She is initially a character with whom readers can easily identify, and it is Hogan's clever construction that makes this happen quickly.

From the beginning of the novel, readers' hearts will go out to the lost, abused little girl who is stolen from her tribe. Not knowing the full details of the past sixteen years of her life or the full explanation for her scarred appearance or depth of her abuse pulls them in to uncover the answers. Through the flashback memories of various characters, readers are given a hint of that answer, but lured in to more questions that arise. As Angel searches for answers to why her mother, Hannah, abused her, it turns out that the answers are deeper rooted than she imagined: "Nobody knows where it began, your story. ... What happened to you started long ago. It began around the time of the killing of the wolves" (37). Angel learns that her maternal grandmother had lived a

tragic and terrible life, which is representative of the violations that Native Americans suffered from Europeans: “*We wanted to hate her. But Loretta wasn’t the original sin. It was just that something inside her had up and walked away and left the rest behind. There was no love left in her. There was no belief. Not a bit of conscience. There wasn’t anything left in her*” (39). This is the memory that Angel hears that introduces her grandmother and mother to her, describing Hannah as having “*empty eyes*” and being full of “*poison*” (40). Readers realize along with Angel that there is a complicated history behind her questions, and they seek the answers along with her.

Though somewhat unfamiliar in construction to the typical American reader, the text of *Solar Storms* remains relatively comprehensible. Its readability makes it accessible to students even as they adjust to shifting narrators recounting stories within the story. As Catherine Kunce explains, “Hogan’s blending of time—past, present, and future—into a unified comprehension ironically mimics the most efficient way to read *Solar Storms*...[and eventually reveal the] hidden connections between traditions and its significance to the present moment” (50). The various memories merge into Angel’s present reality, serving to reconnect her to her heritage—as well as offer cultural background for students. This method urges readers to keep turning the pages; they stay engaged and are drawn deeper into Angel’s world.

The memories that are retold to Angel serve to alter time, merging the past with the present. This links them together and creates a feeling of timelessness for the issues that the memories bring up. The memories unfold as present events are continuing similar trespasses against the Native American people. The memories also serve as a means to foreshadow what will come of their end. Readers learn that

Hannah has “poison” (40) in her, but don’t learn until later how it entirely manifests. They learn that people sensed the danger Angel was in with her mother; on the night of her birth, the midwife “did not want to leave [Angel] alone with Hannah. She feared [Angel was] in danger. She felt what was to come” (109). As these memories build, the magnitude of the Euro-American effects on Angel her people become clear.

Just as quickly as readers are identifying with Angel, she begins her transformative journey which begins reconstructing her interpretations of the very characteristics that readers find connection to. Bleck elaborates on how Angel's perceptions are changing: “Angel’s experiences ... cause her to reject society’s worldview and to accept a worldview based on tribal wisdom and nature’s laws” (30). Hogan artfully constructs the contrast between Native American and Western cultures—breaking through pluralistic notions to bring the differences in lifestyle into focus. Hogan “enfold[s] Western conceptualizations of reality and identity within ancient indigenous understandings of interconnectivity and process” (Arnold 161-162). Through their connection to Angel, readers are forced to reevaluate their own constructions of their Westernized ideas and consider alternate perspectives.

In another union of past and present, Hogan details a return journey home for the main character. Angel has been displaced by time and circumstance from her cultural home; through this, she begins as an outsider to the culture. It is an appropriate place for readers to begin the journey with her; she learns the culture she never knew, teaching readers about her heritage along the way. Castor offers, “The narrative of *Solar Storms* might be thought of in terms of a journey the reader makes toward a more

complex understanding of place” (162); as students conceptualize this new understanding of place, they are pushed to relate this to their own place in the world.

The theme of returning is felt throughout the book, beginning with Angel's return to her homeland and people; Dora-Rouge tells her: “I always called you the girl who would return” (31), and Angel's arrival sets a cycle of returning in motion. Angel begins her journey to a home she doesn't remember, trying to uncover her past to understand who she is. However, she intuitively senses her returning as natural: “I was at the end of my life in one America, and a secret part of me knew this end was also a beginning... It was a felt thing, that I was traveling toward myself like rain falling into a lake, going home to a place I'd lived, still inside my mother, returning to people I'd never met” (26).

It is more than the physical return journeys that the characters are making, but symbolic returns as well. For Angel, it is a return to her heritage, herself. Angel thinks: “...I was travelling backward in time toward myself at the same time I journeyed forward...” (64). For Dora-Rouge, it is a return to her homeland to complete her life cycle and pass on: “Dora-Rouge, the woman going home, was going backward in her memory as well, in the way that a single life travels in a closed circle” (167). It is a return through memory for multiple characters, and the varied voices reveal pieces of Angel's past to her. This return journey is a prevailing theme in Native American literature (“Native American Women” 3), and it is part of what contributes to the authenticity of the Native American experience.

Linda Hogan's presents further perspective to the Western perspective by utilizing storytelling in *Solar Storms*. Hogan says of Native American literature: “It is often a transmission, through written language, of the oral traditions that were, and still

are, passed on by word of mouth” (3). Hogan goes on to explain that it is “By incorporating history, by remembering, Indian women continue to redefine themselves. It is through this remembering that we survive. It is through this speaking that our history is preserved more whole and intact than it was in the past” (Hogan, “Native” 3). There is clear significance to transmitting some of the oral tradition into Native American literature, and the result in *Solar Storms* is a preservation of tradition with an invested reader audience.

As Angel’s elders remember for her pieces of their connected story, she comes into an understanding of herself and her heritage. She is told parts of her own story, as well as other tales that mark her heritage and expose the political struggle within her people’s history. The historical trauma endured by them is revealed through these flashes backward in time while the novel’s unfolding events also serve to teach Angel about her heritage. This method of learning is consistent with how Native American people pass down their lessons and history through the oral tradition; it adds deeper comprehension of her new existence in comparison to the one in foster care that she was never rooted to. It also allows the reader to learn and appreciate her culture as Angel does, magnifying the reverence and understanding for it.

The structure of the novel itself mirrors the oral tradition of storytelling, further engaging the audience. The oral tradition is an important aspect of Native American cultures; it functions to carry their histories and heritage, while also is a tradition in and of itself. The preservation of the oral tradition is critical to the endurance of Native American cultures, as it encompasses more than just the spoken words. Hogan re-creates connection to orality through the underlying structure of the novel. The varied

voices contribute to the feel of an oral experience; each memory builds somewhat upon the others, which is reflective of the structure of oral stories. The stories themselves encompass culture, history, and learning—the ones that Angel is hearing as well as the larger one being told by Hogan. Using this style to construct a larger understanding of the culture adds to the authentic nature of the tale.

Like Hogan, Dora-Rouge and Bush function like the proverbial Native American storyteller; they weave history, tradition and lessons into their tales. Their manner of telling functions not simply to tell the story but also to sustain the culture. They accomplish this by holding true to the traditions and incorporating the form and foundation of Native American orality into their narratives. They interact with Angel, and thereby the reader audience, throughout the story. As readers are identifying with Angel, they read the memories directed at “*you*,” on a deeper level. The storytellers make the story an active experience for both Angel and readers, evoking orality and infusing their words with tradition. It is not only their words, but also their purpose in trying to reconnect Angel to her heritage which helps preserve their culture. The circular fashion in which the memories build to the present and back again is a device that echoes the way that oral stories were actually told. Characters interact with the readers and though they might not realize it, they are engaging in an aspect of the tradition in this manner.

Like the writing Hogan uses to tell her story, characters also adapt to this medium where necessary: letters to the government, articles of protest, new Bible chapters, and autobiographies. Bleck connects these ideas:

[Hogan's] works act as a continuation of the oral traditions and songs that remain a crucial part of many tribal societies, but with one notable exception, that they are written rather than spoken. Her characters often write their way around social and physical barriers, and their works become modern adaptations of the Native American oral "living" tradition and remain inseparable from the Native American worldview. (36)

It is the ever-adapting Native Americans who are now empowered with the written word to continue the oral tradition of their culture. Bleck goes on to say that "Writing becomes an act of resistance against, liberation from, and a place to re-imag[in]e society's constricting spatial boundaries through her stories' connections to the oral tradition and nature" (36). With this redefined mode of storytelling, readers are further participants in an ongoing tradition.

The emotion generated through reading *Solar Storms* is a powerful tool in building cultural competence. The novel begins by pulling at readers' emotions with the immediate sympathy for an abused child. The conflicting emotions that Angel goes through upon her return stabilize throughout her journey, transmitting her realizations through the pages. Angel also demonstrates her own empathy in her gradual understanding of her mother. She comes to recognize that her mother's terrible actions were a product of larger forces at work. The oppression of her people are revealed in Hannah's "empty eyes" (40) and life void of love. Angel models the empathy that readers adopt, for Angel, Hannah, and the Native American people.

Through identifying with the main character, readers find the universality in a portion of the struggles she deals with; this enables them to bridge an understanding to those that they do not. Castor suggests that:

[T]he narrative power of *Solar Storms* lies in its ability to create a sense of empathy among characters, between the narrator and the landscape, and between the narrator and the reader. The role of empathy in Hogan's novel is not only to persuade her reader to enter her imaginative world, but, more importantly, it is a politicized strategy of influencing her reader's attitudes and understanding of the ways in which indigenous people's rights are connected to the survival of the planet. (Castor 159)

Readers are affected as they read because the construction of the novel evokes such emotional responses, and they do enter into Angel's world. This emotion is accessible for all readers, regardless of their background, making *Solar Storms* an appropriate work for American students to begin their work toward cultural competence. Their heightened levels of engagement stimulate critical thinking and make them more open to reevaluating their perspectives and beliefs. These are the primary tool in developing lasting attitudes toward other cultures, values, and beliefs.

These lasting attitudes are a critical component of cultural competence. With broadened understandings of other cultures, students are simply informed. Readers have undeniably felt alongside the characters in novels like this one and move toward responding to those emotions. Castor speaks of achieving "cultural mediation" through Hogan's literature:

...conflict works through appeals to pathos in texts such as Hogan's where empathetic connections among characters, narrators, and readers make it possible for readers without the direct experience of having their land, language, and culture taken, can nonetheless participate in revising American collective memories in ways that acknowledge the importance of indigenous rights (174).

Accessing these collective memories alongside the characters transmits some of the experience onto the readers; they are enabled with the cultural knowledge and the emotional experience to engage more effectively and appropriately in cross cultural interactions.

#### Chapter Four: Going Global with *The God of Small Things*

The point that sets *The God of Small Things* apart from the other two novels is that it is an international work as opposed to an American work, which further expands students' frameworks and worldviews. While both *The Kite Runner* and *Solar Storms* are valuable in their ethnic perspective, this novel also offers a completely different national perspective. It is solely set in India and written by an Indian woman, not an ethnic-American writer. She writes in English for a world audience, and unlike the other two novels, presents a point of view that is unaltered by living in America. India has certainly felt Western influence, but the work remains geographically removed from the United States. This chapter will also begin by examining how *The God of Small Things* offers readers insight into a culture foreign to most mainstream students as well as the significance of student study of this type of work. Like Hosseini and Hogan, Roy elicits empathy from readers and makes this story accessible through its construction: the childlike perspective that it is told, time devices, and storytelling. These features prime students for their growing cultural competence.

This distance does not interfere with students' growing knowledge of India itself through reading this novel. Roy brings readers a tragic story, primarily offering the unwinding tale from young Rahel's perspective. Through flashbacks to 1969, memories reveal the murder of the low-caste Velutha for loving Rahel and Estha's higher class mother, Ammu. Velutha's death coincides with the death of these twins' young cousin, Sophie. The narrative ultimately tells of the lasting effects of colonialism on the Keralan state and the Kochamma family while also offering insight to the social inequity and instability in the region. The book gives intricate detail of the everyday life in India; for

the majority of students who are unfamiliar with the land, they are acquainted with the place and the people through the pages. The book begins with the kind of detail found throughout the book:

May in Ayememnon is a hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid. The river shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dustgreen trees. Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst. Dissolute bluebottles hum vacuously in the fruity air. Then they stun themselves against clear windowpanes and die, fatly baffled in the sun. (3)

Julie Mullaney explains that Roy sought to be regionally specific in her novel, creating a realistic picture of India's south western state of Kerala (28). American students are transported to a foreign place described with exquisite color and imagery.

The detail is constant through the book, surrounding readers with the sights, scents, and sounds of India. Moreover, the detail also provides insight into the people. There is a stereotypical tendency to link India with Hinduism, and the novel counters this by addressing the Christian and Muslim citizens that all coexist. Roy's experiences growing up in this region contributed to conveying this accurately: "A lot of the atmosphere in *God of Small Things* is based on my experiences of what it was like to grow up in Kerala. Most interestingly, it was the only place in the world where religions coincide, there's Christianity, Hinduism, Marxism and Islam and they all live together and rub each other down" (Roy qtd. in Thokkadam).

Readers also get a sense of the changes that had befallen Kerala through the colonization of India. Surendran points out the changes in the city: "In short, Ayemenem had changed unbelievably. The river was polluted beyond words, the swelling

population, the people had lost their innocence, the chain of fivestar hotels all told of its lost glory. Ayemenem could never dream of going back to what it was earlier” (13).

Exploitation was everywhere in the city, to match the effects of colonialization:

unscrupulous police tapping Ammu’s breasts (9), pornographic magazines (13).

Ayemenem had changed into a place tainted by urbanization and colonial influence, where the river “smelled of shit” (13) and was lined in “white scum” (125). Readers begin to understand the dislocation of the people in their own land and the devastating consequences of colonization.

The events unfolding in 1969 India during the primary character Rahel’s childhood reveal for readers the social and political climate of the divided region. A country of many nearly autonomous states, the influence of communism was a tension influencing many. The story reveals just how separate each Indian state is, a point for American students to consider in comparison to the states they generally conceptualize. Their frameworks for understanding country and culture are expanded as they recognize the distinctions between the various Indian states. The states make decisions independent of one another on large matters like government rule. Certain states were more affected by communism; Kerala being one: “...the Communist Party was so much more successful in Kerala than it had been almost anywhere else in India” (63). Kerala’s autonomy within India is further reinforced when it is revealed that “Kerala was on the brink of a civil war” (65). Rahel and her family are swept into a Marxist demonstration and make effort to remain uninvolved:

Within minutes, the road was swamped by thousands of marching people.

Automobile islands in a river of people. The air was red with flags, which

dipped and lifted as the marchers ducked under the level-crossing gate and swept across the railway tracks in a red wave. The sound of a thousand voices spread over the frozen traffic like a Noise Umbrella. (63)

The political tensions of the larger country were running throughout the state, and readers gain historical context with which they can build their cultural sensitivity.

The novel continues to lead readers through the period of resistance and instability surrounding this time frame in India. The historical recounting is critical background to readers' expanding perceptions of this country and its people. Students' realizations of the struggle and background of India become seedlings for their growing cultural competence. They learn of the revolts and government suppression:

The Naxalites movement spread across the country and struck terror into every bourgeois heart. In Kerala, they breathed a plume of excitement and fear into an already frightened air. Killings had begun in the north. That May there was a blurred photograph in the papers of a landlord in Palghat who had been tied to a lamppost and beheaded. (66)

American students are generally uneducated in the complex and regionally distinct history of India, and as Amitava Kumar describes Roy's writing: "[it] engages the recall of—rather, the recoil from—violence and the difficulty of ever articulating its trauma" (86). The stark reality that *The God of Small Things* presents brings them into global awareness as they become involved with this other nation's story.

The insight that *The God of Small Things* provides to the changing political climate in India is compounded by the perspective that it also offers on the caste system. The narrator explains that the "real secret" of communism's success in Kerala

was that it was “a reformist movement that never openly questioned the traditional values of a caste-ridden, extremely traditional community. The Marxists worked from *within* the communal divides, never challenging them, never appearing not to” (64). Though the system of untouchability was officially outlawed in 1950, it was still a reality in 1969. Of the ill-fated Velutha, the narrator tells readers: “Apart from his carpentry skills, Velutha had a way with machines. Mammachi (with impenetrable Touchable logic) often said that if only he hadn’t been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer” (72). Students get a sense of the lasting effects of the class structure in India through these culminating comments.

Readers also get a sense of the changing times in India, citizens pressing back on the caste and government systems. The resistance efforts are reflected in various historical references as well as characters. One local labor union organized to demand, among other things, that “Untouchables no longer be addressed by their caste names” (67). Furthermore, Rahel’s mother Ammu rejects the notion of untouchability in her love affair with Velutha, while he was simply not a man who was bound by his caste. While Velutha did not openly revolt against the system, he did not carry himself as a low-caste man:

Vellya Paapen feared for his youngest son. He couldn’t say what it was that frightened him. It was nothing that he had said. Or done. It was not *what* he said, but the *way* he said it. Not *what* he did, but the *way* he did it. Perhaps it was just a lack of hesitation. An unwarranted assurance. In the way that he walked. The way he held his head. The quiet way he offered suggestions without being asked. Or the quiet way he disregarded

suggestions without appearing to rebel. While these were qualities that were perfectly acceptable, perhaps even desirable, in Touchables, Vellya Paapen thought that in a Paravan they could (and would, and indeed, *should*) be construed as insolence. (73)

Unlike his father, Velutha had not grown up to believe that his caste held the whole of his identity. His quiet self-assurance speaks to the evolving social consciousness in India in a post-colonial society.

In American studies, students are given a brief glimpse of India, generally as it relates to the United States. Students gloss over the colonized history of the land, largely attributing this to a circumstance of the past. This narrow view of the country begins to broaden with *The God of Small Things*. The effects of colonization on India have left deep marks on the country; it is an important aspect for consideration in constructing their worldviews. Laura Carter notes that “The British influence [on] the Indian culture insidiously lurks at the heart of the novel” (1), citing the ways that the characters in the family demonstrate the lasting effects of colonization. Ammu is looked down upon by her family because she left her drunken, abusive husband. Her father, whom she calls a “shit wiper” (50) to the English because he is marked by Western influence, does not believe that an Englishman would behave as she claims. As a result, “Ammu is ostracized by her own people, as are her innocent children, predicated or based on a sort of high-flying, false perception of English decorum as having transcended Indian culture” (Carter 3). Roy presents an altered family dynamic at the hands of colonialism; it is a key point for students to discuss as they reframe their understandings of global society.

Uncle Chacko has also been swayed by Western influence, having “marr[ied] our conquerors” (52), as described by Ammu. He demonstrates hypocrisy in his words and manners, criticizing his family for being “Anglophiles” (51) and trapped “outside their own history” (51). However, he takes pride in his Oxford education and has deep love for his English wife. Carter also states that “It is Chacko who is quick to point out that the family’s desire to see *The Sound of Music* is ‘an extended exercise in Anglophilia.’” (2). He is also the one who makes the connection from history to houses, explaining that “To understand history ... we have to go inside and listen to what [the whispers inside] are saying. And look at the books and pictures on the wall. And smell the smells” (51). The History House that Chacko speaks of is a shadowy reminder of the darkness that has been left behind for the colonized and a mark left in the minds of readers.

*The God of Small Things* is significant as an international work for students to experience, helping them to frame their thoughts in relation to the world. India has long held an element of intrigue for the West, largely considered to be rich in spirituality and enlightenment, but this limited perspective is generalized and incomplete. Reading literature from the second most populated country in the world is a more pressing matter than students might initially realize. India has been growing as a potential world superpower: “The world's largest democracy and second most populous country emerged as a major power in the 1990s. It is militarily strong, has a big cultural influence and a fast-growing and powerful economy” (BBC). India's influence is being felt internationally, ranging from their world market to their entertainment industry.

Author Amit Chaudhuri expresses that people from the West look at countries such as India like blank spaces, for lack of knowledge and exposure to them. There is a

void in American students' education that neglects real familiarity with other nations. Literature is a medium with which to fill this blank; however, relatively few Indian authors have been translated into English, and even fewer are studied in classrooms. Kumar comments on the limited Indian novels written in English:

Even if we take the novels written only in, say, Hindi or Urdu, around the singular event of the partition of India in 1947 ... very little that has been written in English in India ever approaches the eloquent expressions in those novels of the woes, the divided hopes, or the numb, demented silences of ten million uprooted lives. And yet there is an undeniable quality, if not also force, to several new novels written in English. (85)

She hints at the force behind *The God of Small Things*, recognizing the layers within the novel. This novel and other Indian writings in English open up the literary arena for students to benefit from the invaluable education that these works have to offer.

Some scholars feel that publishing in the English language is an opportunity for India to better navigate a competitive world. Author Salman Rushdie expresses that "...Indian writers *writing in English* [are] proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the 16 'official languages' of India" (Toor 16). This is stemming from the concept that India has a voice to be heard and can be more accessible to the rest of the world in a more common language. This is a point of controversy in India, as Saadia Toor goes on to explain: "To an older generation of Indians, this was a preposterous claim which completely eluded the depth and range of Indian writing" (16). Those who would contest authors publishing in English would say that it takes away from the true heritage of the country. In spite of this

opposition, Indian authors who do choose to write in English seem to maintain India's effort to stake a claim in the current world order; likewise, it has resulted in a growing number of Indian authors gaining international recognition and bringing recognition to India with them. This has further enabled a growing awareness of the nation's people to worldwide audiences.

While this Indian literature is now available to a world market, other opposition feels that catering to world markets by using the English language simply contributes to misconceptions of India. The glimpses that outsiders receive through the pages serve to eroticize India further in narrow Western minds. Though, with well-constructed texts to read, this risk is minimized. Aijaz Ahmad argues that Roy is “the first Indian writer in English where a marvelous stylistic resource becomes available for provincial, vernacular culture without any effect of exoticism or estrangement” (qtd. in Abraham 89). Furthermore, with commitment from the students to have contextualized discourse about the novel—and thereby the country—this argument is further dismantled.

The more obvious relevance to students' lives are the universal themes found throughout *The God of Small Things*. The concept of interconnectedness, of large and small things, is a point that students will find commonality within their own lives. They will recognize that history, combined with details that might seem insignificant, can have a ripple effect throughout the country. They will see love and losses reflected in the pages and find the connection to their more tangible world. Roy says of her novel: “... *The God of Small Things* is not a book specifically about ‘our culture’—it's a book about human nature. Of course, in different societies the details vary. But since the dawn of time, human society has found ways in which to divide itself, to make war across these

divisions, to make love across these divisions” (qtd. in Abraham 91). These universal themes are what make the foreign more familiar for students as they navigate India’s Keralan culture through the pages.

With childlike reason and rationale, *The God of Small Things* moves readers through its pages. The narrator follows the characters, primarily the children, through their returning and their memories; because the focus is on the children, readers adapt to the language more easily. They can recognize the ways that Estha and Rahel are trying to make sense of the happenings around them, and the style becomes another way that the readers are connected to the characters. Mainstream American students are also making sense of the country and culture that they are reading, and the perceptions of children lead them through it.

The language of the text reinforces the children as the primary characters. Janet Thormann highlights the construction of the novel:

The writing breaks words into syllables, as in “a Nowl” or “Bar Nowl,” or weights them with emotion: “Later became a menacing, goosebumpy word. Lay. Ter. Like a deep-sounding bell in a mossy well. Shivery, and furred. Like a moth’s feet” (139). Phrases reduce to nonsense, and neologisms, form, as in “Thimble-drinker. Coffin-cartwheeler” (134). Words combine in rhymes, to create unanticipated meanings, like “a viable die-able age” (310). Meaning decomposes into pure phonemes, like “Per NUN sea ayshun” (147). Capitalization enforces necessity and emphasis, as in “It’s Best to be Prepared” (253). All of these elements of [language] reappear to take on a life of their own in the writing, especially the

mother's disciplinary injunction, "stop it," transformed to "stoppit," "STOP IT," and "so they stoppited." (301)

With relatively simple language, Roy depicts the inner workings of a child's mind. She uses words that blur together, variations of onomatopoeias, and sentence fragments; all of these devices work to emphasize the children's point of view in the story. They also work to lure the reader into the inner monologue at work in the narrative; readers get most intimately acquainted with Rahel, as her thoughts are most often revealed. They are able to put themselves inside her mind, adding to their ability to identify with her. She becomes a source of connection by way of her youth.

The novel also shows young Rahel's consistent desire to make sense of the things happening around her:

The sun shone through the Plymouth window directly down at Rahel. She closed her eyes and shone back at it. Even behind her eyelids the light was bright and hot. The sky was orange, and the coconut trees were sea anemones waving their tentacles, hoping to trap and eat an unsuspecting cloud. A transparent spotted snake with a forked tongue floated across the sky. Then a transparent Roman soldier on a spotted horse. ... It didn't make any sense at all. Weatherwise or otherwise. (79)

As the child Rahel tries to make sense of her world, the readers are wound into her world. Her perception becomes a mix of child-like perceptions and reality, giving readers an honest insight into the country and its happenings.

The child in literature is a proper vessel for transmitting a cultural education. Students' connection to children is innate; they naturally gravitate toward these

characters because of their ease in identifying with younger subjects. Furthermore, there is an honesty to the way that a child perceives the world, even if naïve. For most American students, they are in a similar position—inexperienced in foreign cultures. For a child to lead the way through the culture is a gentle way to educate American outsiders to the foundations, traditions, and values of a foreign culture.

Throughout the novel, the narration is building toward a mysterious culminating event which is foreshadowed in various ways. Readers gain a sense of the mark this event has left on the characters, from Estha's refusal to speak to Rahel's general disinterest in life. The glimpses into the fateful night are doled out slowly and build a sense of tense anticipation. Almost immediately in the novel, readers learn of a child's death and the uncertain role that some played in it: "Though Ammu, Estha, and Rahel were allowed to attend the funeral, they were made to stand separately, not with the rest of the family. Nobody would look at them" (7). The events are further emphasized for importance through their capitalization, marking them in the minds of the children and readers alike: "The Loss of Sophie Mol" (17), "re-Returned" (11), "Before the Terror" (38). This technique builds a sense of mystery, and it serves to urge the readers forward as they seek to uncover the truth of what has happened.

*The God of Small Things* is marked by altered time, and the theme of returning is yet another way that this manifests: Ammu's return to her family, Estha's return to his father and re-return to his family, Rahel's subsequent homecoming, and the returning of power to India. Return journeys are an "organizing theme" (Mullaney 29) of the text; moving from physical returns to emotional and psychological returns. Roy marks these "Returns" with capital letters, signifying the weight that they bear on the narrative.

Readers return with these characters, through time and distance to unravel the family's tragic past and India's conflicted history.

The adult characters' returns are physical and symbolic; they demonstrate falling back on colonized mindsets and beliefs. Ammu breaks away from her family when she manages to marry but must return to them when her drunken husband attempts to prostitute her. Her homecoming is marred by the fact that her father refuses to believe that the event happened. Mullaney points out that "he has so internalized the values, beliefs, and ideologies of the colonizer that he cannot countenance criticism or question anyone he sees as representative of that system" (37). Chacko himself embodies the colonized Indian, enamored with his Oxford education and English family. He returns to take care of the family business but is inescapably linked to Western influences.

The novel opens with Rahel's return to meet her brother Estha, who was re-Returned by his father after they were separated since the fateful events in 1969. This year is marked by the brief Communist return to power in the state which reflects a backdrop of conflict to the devastating story unfolding for the Kochammas. At the point of Rahel's return, Mullaney explains that through her revisited memories, the novel "explores the topography of the [Kochamma] family and the subterranean connections between individual family history and local, national, and world histories" (30). Rahel returns from living in America after leading a life marked by indifference and "enforced optimism" (20). She had drifted through her life, lost since the events of 1969 had come crashing down on her reality. The residual effects of the colonized caste system had erupted in their household when it was revealed that Ammu was having an affair with

the lower-caste Velutha; Rahel drifted” (16) and resorted to a life of passivity to navigate the confused and corrupted repercussions.

Estha was also alone when he was returned to his father after the death of Sophie Mol. He retreated inside of himself, refusing to speak and barely engaging with the world:

Once the quietness arrived, it stayed and spread in Estha. It reached out of his head and enfolded him with its swampy arms. It rocked him to the rhythm of an ancient, fetal heartbeat. ... It stripped his thoughts of the words that described them and left them pared and naked. Unspeakable. Numb. And to an observer therefore, perhaps barely there. Slowly, over the years, Estha withdrew from the world. He grew accustomed to the uneasy octopus that lived inside him and squirted its inky tranquilizer on his past. Gradually the reason for his silence was hidden away, entombed somewhere deep in the soothing folds of the fact of it. (13)

What Estha, and likewise Rahel, distanced themselves from was the reality of a lost sense of their history. They had their lives yanked out from under them; the adults in the story didn't recognize how so many little things in their lives were the result of colonial influence. All around them, an evolution of beliefs and standards were unfolding—taking shape in the union protests and communist movement. However, when the “Love Laws” set by their cultural caste system were broken by Ammu and Velutha, this was perhaps viewed as another manifestation of Western influence, and the other adult characters regressed deeply into their cultural values and reacted violently. L. Chris Fox explains that their affair was a hybridity of classes that elicits fear in the older generation:

“Hybridity (and the reaction to it) may be a distorting factor equal to the lingering effects of British Imperialism ...” (41). The lasting effects are multileveled and layered, just as the craftsmanship of the text itself.

Though unconventional in its style, *The God of Small Things* invokes the nature of storytelling, and readers are more deeply engaged as a result. The novel does not move chronologically; rather, it shifts back and forth in time through memories. Through these memories, the story of the Kochamma family is told, as well as the historical events that have shaped their fates. Although the narrator follows all the characters, it remains most closely linked to Rahel and her memories. This provides readers a character that they most deeply connect to, being intimately acquainted with her thoughts.

The roots of Indian storytelling are grounded in a history of orality, and the novel brings out an oral quality through its structure. Building on the childlike interpretations of language, Rahel in particular, offers an audible context from which readers can draw upon: “Language for the children is literal and oral; what they read is transformed into sounds, and what they hear has the material substance of letters” (Thormann 301). From the novel’s beginning, readers sense her voice: “Dus to dus to dus to dus to dus” (9), and throughout the novel, certain sounds are articulated for the readers’ minds to hear: “*Hslip Hslip Hslip Hsnooh-snah*” (108), “*Pfft!*” (138), “Their Prer NUN sea aysun was perfect” (147). The children also attempt to interpret adult-speak, which is also transmitted on the pages: “*Lucky rich boy with porketmunny*” (143), “One mint” (128). The nonsensical language is what the children hear and transfer their listening to the reader through the text.

The novel has a dramatic element in its construction which brings readers further inside the moment of the narrative. Roy is also a screenwriter, and *The God of Small Things* demonstrates a cinematic quality as it comes to life for readers. As Toor points out, “The writing zooms in and out of scenarios, and the descriptions of the scenes are also heavily filmic in quality. ... here, the novel incorporates the camera’s eye” (18). The film-like quality serves to enliven the characters and bring a further realism to the narrative. Furthermore, the omniscient narrator provides insight into the characters’ feelings of the moment and reveals them to the audience. This adds to the drama of the story and further engages the reader as their minds work to figure out what the various characters will be thinking. These techniques promote an intimate acquaintance with the characters, breathing life into them.

The reading of this novel becomes an intensely emotional experience as readers journey with the characters through their traumatic ordeal: “The traumatic structure of the narrative forces readers to experience the trauma of the abject as if they are already subject to it” (Fox 35). The experiences of the characters are transferred to the readers as they become more deeply involved in the story. They witness violence and injustice alongside Rahel and Estha, and because the structure of the text has earned their commitment to it, they are also marked by the events.

The readers are deeply engaged by this compelling story, from its structure to its content: “What is not conventionally handled is the narrative of the abject, the trauma that spreads, which emphasizes the *results* of abuse, intimidations, and murder, the high cost of caste. It is this which, in a writerly way, demands close attention from readers” (Fox 52). This close attention quickly turns to compassion as the story spirals

down its tragic course; the compassion breeds empathy as readers move through the terrible events with the characters.

As students are pulled into the novel, emotion builds for the characters. As empathy grows within readers, so do their foundations for cultural competence. They become aware of the historical forces that have shaped India's history; though through the novel's specific focus on Kerala, students also recognize the unique qualities of the nation. As they journey with Rahel and Estha, their sensitivity to the culture grows. More importantly, as they *feel* alongside the characters, readers are also altered by the experiences that have unfolded in the novel. This cultural, historical, and emotional journey broadens their worldview and stimulates reflection on their own role in the global community.

## Conclusion

Multicultural literature holds powerful potential for students; more than a literary education, this literature can also provide the tools for developing the competence necessary in the evolving cultural climate. It is critical for students to learn that how they perceive the world is shaped by the individual lens that they are viewing it through. In order to truly see other cultures, they need to get past their assumptions, biases, stereotypes, and incomplete educations to reach a larger degree of truth. Students will undoubtedly encounter the need for meaningful cross-cultural communication in their lifetimes, and they have a real need to be prepared for successfully negotiating these interactions. Ethnic literature can serve as the primer for students in this arena; through these works, they are developing their sensitivity and receptivity to cultural difference.

To more fully promote these skills, students in the U.S. need more than brief encounters with literature of difference; they need sustained study of varied multicultural literature to broaden their worldviews and encourage reflection on their own attitudes and behaviors. Perhaps these works should be incorporated into other disciplines where appropriate; History, Economics, Global Issues, or Sociology courses could all enrich their study by including novels that offer alternate perspectives to the dominant Western one found in most curriculums. Similarly, ethnic literature should be spread throughout the English courses required of students, presenting multiple texts for focused study. Regardless of the method of inclusion, American students need more opportunities to actively engage with multicultural literature to develop the frameworks for effectively engaging in a diverse society.

The novels presented here are only the beginning of what students need to be engaging in to sustain the cultural education that they facilitate. These works should be spread throughout high school and beginning college course requirements to truly generate sustained critical thinking on cultural matters. The reality is that curriculums generally consolidate literature into small required doses, where students are limited in time with what they can read. Until those curriculums are revised, working within those constraints calls for creative incorporation multiple ethnic works into the allotted space. Whether in literature classrooms, or reaching across disciplines, the value of minority perspectives is inestimable in shaping American students' worldviews.

Other novels possess similar attributes, and could also be instructed with the dual purpose of literary and cultural education: *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine Hong Kingston; *Bone*, Fae Myenne Ng; *Beka Lamb*, Zee Edgell; *The Book Thief*, Markus Zusak; *Night*, Elie Weisel; *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, Julia Alvarez; *The House on Mango Street*, Sandra Cisneros; *A Gathering of Old Men*, Ernest J. Gaines; *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh; *Wind From an Enemy Sky*, D'Arcy McNickle. These novels are also tapping into many or all of the elements discussed in this study; while this is not a comprehensive list, they are an indication of the scope of multiethnic literature available that accesses the key elements discussed here that also make them well-suited for building cultural competence.

*The Kite Runner*, *Solar Storms*, and *The God of Small Things*, are all remarkable works ready to be accessed for their potential in the literary arena as well as for building cultural competence. It is the way that these novels reach out to students, requiring active involvement, which sets them apart as perfect for this purpose. Each in their

unique way takes students on a journey with the characters that offers a historical background of the people while deeply moving readers to feel alongside the protagonists. Students' heightened emotions and broadened cultural frameworks are what will translate into affected attitudes and behaviors that they will take away from the classroom and into society. With these foundations constructed, students are afforded new perspectives to apply to their cross-cultural interactions and continually deepen their cultural competence.

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