THE ROLE OF CHILDREN’S LITERATURE
IN DEVELOPING MULTICULTURAL LITERACY

Widyastuti Purbani

Abstract

In the global era, it is becoming more impossible for a community to live exclusively without having interaction with other cultures. Multiculturalism is a given entity for many nations. Yet, some nations have not seen the importance of multicultural education and are ignorant on the need of multicultural literacy. As a young generation, children need to be introduced to values and ideology which will be useful in their future life. Because living in the middle of complicated diversity is an unavoidable fact for future generation, multicultural literacy becomes indispensible. Multicultural literacy for young children should be coined as an important agenda at schools and homes. Children’s literature has a great potential to articulate underrepresented children and help children understand how to appreciate cultural diversity. This paper explores the power and role of children’s literature as a medium multicultural literacy and the characteristics of multicultural children’s literature for that purpose.

Key words: multiculturalism, literacy, children's literature, Indonesian children’s literature

Introduction

Multiculturalism is an unquestionable issue in a multicultural country like Indonesia, a nation with more than a hundred tribes, ethnicities and languages, and nearly a dozen of religions, beliefs and classes. Indeed multicultural problems such as sexism, racism, classism, handicapism and discrimination based on ethnicity and religion have turned out to be threats, intimidations, even terrorization for some people. Bali and Marriot bombing and several church explosions happened in the last ten years indicate the lack
of multicultural understanding among the countrymen. Ironically, a number of cases are simply overlooked, silently forgotten or easily forgiven in spite of the anguishes.

Multicultural literacy has not yet been viewed as an important agenda in almost all levels of education in Indonesia. The negligence of multicultural education is very obvious to HAR Tilaar. In the 2003 Education Decree the term multicultural education is not even mentioned (Tilaar, HAR, 2004:182-184). Indonesian children most likely know that they live in a country with numerous cultures, yet they are not seriously educated to develop appreciation of and respect for cultural diversity, to see things from different angles, to understand the existence of multiple viewpoints, “to listen to other human’s voice, to experience the doubts, fears and joys of a person who may not look or sound like them at all” (Mora, 1998). Hence, they feel that their own culture is the only right one, or on the other hand, are ignorant, do not recognize or probably feel inferior of their own cultural heritage. In many countries children’s literature has been widely used as an effective media in spreading the seeds of multicultural consciousness (Mitchell, Diana, 2002). Stories like Duke Ellington, Sweet Color and the Freedom Quilts, The Dragon Prince: A Chinese Beauty and the Beast Tale, Black Hands, and White Sails: The Story of African American Whalers are a few examples of popular multicultural stories deliberately written and used in American schools to encourage multicultural awareness. Although Indonesia is rich of children’s folktales, traditional and contemporary narratives, stories with multicultural themes are scarcely available. Writing and rewriting children’s literature emphasizing multicultural content should be put as a crucial educational agenda. This paper will discuss the importance of multicultural children’s literature and its role in developing multicultural literacy.

The Need for Multicultural Literacy

The word multiculturalism is derived from the word ‘multi’ and ‘culture’. This slippery term should be understood in the view that culture is not static. Culture is a result of a long process of evolution. It is a becoming process which has gone through a number of influences, interactions, and mixtures of other different cultures. That is why it is usually
difficult to trace and question about limit and origin of a particular culture. Although it is alright to be proud of one’s own culture, believing that only a single culture is the best and the most right is absurd, because by nature culture is never single and by no mean fixed. By nature, culture is itself plural. In fact we do not live in a single culture and it is impossible to interact with solely people of our own culture.

Multicultural should become an important agenda in education because of some reasons. Among others are,

- Every community cannot sterilize itself from being multicultural, be it ethnic, religion, class, race, level of education, or wealth. Monoculturalism or believing that there is only a single right culture and forcing a culture to be clean from cultural interaction with other cultures will only cause exclusivism.

- People want to live in a just society, where people respect each other, where there is no prejudices and suspicions against each other.

- People want to respect human’s right for everyone/every member of the society. We have to guarantee that all students, young generation and all members of society can and should learn or be educated. We have to make sure that difference in cultural ethnic or other background should not be understood as deficiency.

- People want to produce a generation with global perspective. To be global one has to be able to not only live side by side but also interact or mingle with people of other kinds. The phrases “to be able to live together” or “to be able to work together” become important qualifications of a future generation. Responsible educators must put these qualifications as a target of their curriculum or education activities.

Multiculturalism can be understood as a value as well as a skill. To learn a value effectively education should start teaching it as early as possible. The golden time, when children are under the age of twelve can be best time to teach values or ideology. In this period of time, it is very strategic for educators to introduce concepts and values
of life, including multicultural values. There is however a misconception about the possibility of teaching complicated concept to children. Most people thought that children could only learn simple concept. The facts show that complexity is possible to be absorbed by even young children.

The challenge that most educators face concerning value education to children everywhere in the world is the lack of support from the environment. Sometimes the educators have tried hard to teach a particular concept. Yet, because the value under study is not widely practiced among the community where the children live in, or because what children see in their everyday life is the opposite concept, they fail to learn the value. In other words, the value being taught at school fail to be learnt by children because the living environment does not provide conducive millieu and role models for them to learn.

Since values are learned through discourses, as many ideological apparatuses as possible that both actively and passively spread out the ideology will help making the concept possible to learn. Media, such as television, radio, video games and literature can play role as an ideological apparatuses.

Literacy cannot only be understood in a narrow perspective as unblinding one from reading and writing skills. Literacy is widely understood as the project of making people aware and understand the most basic concept of life including gender, race and ethnicity. As poor literacy is usually perceived as rife and illiterates as handicapped or at-risk group, the danger of multicultural illiteracy is visible (Wickert, Rosie in Luke and Gilbert, 1993). The need for a multicultural literacy is stimulated by a study conducted in around 1929. The research reveals a surprising finding that children develop negative attitudes towards other people as they take on the culture of their parents. (Jacobs and Tunnels, 1996) The study also reveals that by the age of three, the racial awareness is evident. This racial attitude will get crystallized by the age of ten. This study stimulated educators to put multicultural literacy into one of their important agendas. Multicultural literacy can be understood as unblinding people, especially younger generations, about why and how to live in socio cultural diversity. The main aim of multicultural literacy is therefore to unblind people, to make them understand and skillful on the importance of
living in a socio cultural diversity, to tolerate and appreciate each other and living harmoniously together.

**Literature and Values Education**

Values are constructed through some ideological apparatuses. They could be parental or family education, formal/informal education, media, religion, rules and laws etc. Literature is an important and effective medium of value construction. It was because of this awareness that in the past, literature was widely used to spread out moral messages and educational values. It is only recently that we realize the weakness of didactic literature. Long time before, almost all children’s and adults’ literary works are rich of didacticism. Although we must train ourselves on how to tell stories in a better manner, that is how to tell values not in a preachy way, using children’s literature to disseminate values remains favorable in many places in the world.

Most literary works are written to amuse or please people. In this context, pleasure or enjoyment offered by literature is not pleasure and enjoyment in a narrow sense. It is pleasure and enjoyment in a broad sense. Perry Nodelman (2002) argues that there are several kinds of pleasure offered by children’s literature. They are the pleasure of having our emotion evoked, the pleasure of the story, the pleasure of recognizing gaps in our repertoire and learning the information or the strategy we need to fill them, the pleasure of understanding, of seeing how literature not only mirrors life but comments on it and many others\(^1\). In Nodelman’s view there are at least twenty pleasures in children’s literature. Because by nature literature is entertaining and amusing, it can be a powerful medium to spread out values, including multicultural values, without the readers’ awareness. Indeed the less explicit values are within a text, the more potential for them to be absorbed by readers.

Secondly, literature is about life and experiences. The life experience told through literature must be a special, unique or selected one, or it will cease to be coined as a literature. Children need life experience to be told to them so they may learn and understand without they have to experience it on their own.
In the past, children’s literature were believed to perpetuate only ‘safe’ and ‘secure’ topics, or topics that are consider unproblematical to children. Children’s literature in the past almost always portray loving and happy families. In contemporary children’s literature, however, ‘difficult’ and complicated topics are introduced to children’s. Death, divorce and separation, illness, disappointment are common topics in 21st century children’s literature. The literary quality of children’s literature enables such a difficult topic to be introduced to the young minds easily.

**Multicultural Children’s Literature: What and How?**

A nation like Indonesia comprises hundreds of ethnic groups. Every ethnic group has important contribution in the process and making of the nation. However some if not many ethnic groups are underrepresented. Their faces, stories, languages or histories are not well articulated. Their existences are missing. They just do not exist in books or records of the nation they and their ancestors live in for decades. Melani Budianta (2003) maintains that upon completing a high education, a Papuan fails to identify himself as a Papuan because they cannot find their identity being discussed or talked about in the textbooks used at schools and university.

Multicultural literature is literature which pay attention on the people whose voices are never heard, whose faces are traditionally not pictured, and whose stories are not written in books or records. Multicultural literature is literature which think and care about the existence of the traditionally forgotten people.

Whether we are conscious or not, children often ask why faces or bodies like theirs are never represented in the books they read; why it is hard for them to find books in which they can listen to their own stories and see pictures about them. Mitchell (2002) maintains that ‘it is important that all children in the classrooms see people who look like them in literature they read’. It is important for children to see themselves in the media, because their bodies and stories are part of the nation.
Based on the above discussion, multicultural children’s literature can be inferred as children’s literature with the following characteristics,

- Portraying unique or interesting cultural descriptions such as the ritual, the tradition, the symbol, the ceremonies, the values and ideologies, the experiences etc.

- Correcting or breaking common stereotypes. For example Indians, Papuans or natives are almost always portrayed living in rural areas or in the wood, wearing primitive costume. This is stereotyping. In reality, there are many Indians or Papuans who live in big cities and lead a modern life. Multicultural books must correct this stereotype by a portrayal of the cultures in contemporary situations.

- Giving detailed explanation upon over generalization or simplification about a particular culture. Chinese, Africans or Javanese are usually described as if they are cultures with particular stigma such as Javanese are slow, Chinese are mingy etc. This oversimplification can be corrected by giving detailed explanation.

- Telling stories about the beauty of tolerance, respect, sharing, peace and harmony between cultures.

- Telling stories about equality and social justice.

- Telling stories about the misery of social or cultural hatreds or fights.

- Articulating the voice of people coming from minor cultures

- May tell a cultural arrogance but must be followed by a process of understanding of major culture about minor culture

- Revealing cultural genuinity, authenticity, or accuracy.

There are many examples of great multicultural children’s literature in the world. Although most of them come from countries which have developed multicultural education for years like USA, Canada, England or Australia, the topics are in most
cases relevant to other countries. Therefore they might be used or translated into other languages. *Faithful Friends, Visiting Day, Duke Ellington, Sweet Color and the Freedom Quilts, The Dragon Prince: A Chinese Beauty and the Beast Tale, Black Hands, and White Sails: The Story of African American Whalers and To Hell with Dying, The House on Mango Street* are a few examples of popular multicultural picture books and novels deliberately written and used in American schools to encourage multicultural awareness.

The following are examples of children’s literature which embody multicultural content and might be used in multicultural literacy program.

**What is Black?**

By Mary O’Neill (in Prelutsky and So, 1999)

Black is the night
When there isn’t a star
And you can’t tell by looking
Where you are.

Black is a pail of paving tar.
Black is jet
And things you’d like to forget.
Black is a smokestack
Black is a cat,
And leopard, a raven,
A high sild hat.
The sound of black is
“Boom! Boom! Boom!”
Echoing in
An empty room.

Black is kind –
It covers up
The run down street
The broken cup.

Black is charcoal
And patio grill.
The soot spots on
The window sill.
Black is a feeling
Hard to explain
Like suffering but
Without the pain.
Black is licorice
And patent leather shoes
Black is the print
In the news.
Black is beauty
In its deepest form,
The darkest cloud
In a thunderstorm.
Think of what starlight
And lamplight would lack
Diamons and fireflies
If they couldn’t lean against
Black.............

This poem is useful in introducing the kinds of meanings and feelings emerging from the word ‘black’. In general black is usually associated with badness or ugliness. Black people are easily stigmatised with negative quality. In this poem, black may mean strength, beauty, depth, importance and other positive qualities. In this poem black is perceived to perpetuate multi facets and multi dimensions. This poem is strategic in eliminating prejudices towards a particular colour. In the class, after the discussion on the poem’s content, children might be encouraged to think and coin of the qualities of either black or other colors like purple, yellow, red or pink and compare their findings with their friends.

*Visiting Day* by Woodson does not only represent African American faces and life who are generally underpresented in books and stories, but also encourages minor and usually inferior heart, the heart of the children whose father, mother or lover has to be imprisoned. This picture book portrays the precious and compelling moments when ‘the visiting day’ comes, the day when the little African American girl must get ready to meet the father in the jail. The book speaks about love of the unlucky people and how they cope with the difficult time together with full of affection.
The best way to teach multicultural children’s literature is by articulating the multicultural or intercultural issues in the literary works. Discussion after the story is told should be focused on these issues. Teachers or parents can switch the shoes or positions of the children and the characters in the text. They are asked to imagine if they take position the character living in a different culture and having different cultural perspective.

**Multicultural Children’s Literature in Indonesia**

In Indonesia, while the need of multicultural children’s literary works is very high, books with multicultural characteristics are scarcely available. In one side, the traditional, local and indigenous children’s literature are plenty, yet because of the lack of multicultural understanding, the multicultural topics are not well cultivated. Picture books such as *Seri Dongeng Anak Indonesia* as an example has not less than 25 titles. It means that there is a big promise of a number of ethnic groups whose life and uniqueness can be articulated and their stories to be vocalized. Yet, the way the writers represent cultural uniqueness is doubtful. For example, in this series the illustrations are made in *manga* style. This way the details, uniqueness and distinctiveness of the people within the stories cast away. What appear are series of dolly faces with empty cultural characteristics. It is hard to use such text to develop multicultural awareness. This situation, however, invites writers and educators to rewrite and redefine this immense texts with multicultural understanding. This gap also opens for illustrators to enter the world of children’s literature to redraw the texts with more multicultural understanding.

**References**


