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Embracing culture, difference through literature

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Abstract

Studying literature depicting bicultural teenagers can help young readers understand how culture is learned, appreciate cultural differences, and shape their own identity. Pairing a novel relating a Mexican American experience in the US with one relating a French Moroccan experience in France can help make specific cultures global.

Introduction

Coming-of-age novels are popular in high school and university literature classes because they provide a prism through which to view conflict between the adolescent protagonist and society. They reveal the cultural values gradually being accepted as the protagonist moves into adulthood at the same time as the protagonist changes and becomes accepted into society. Because they focus on the psychological and moral growth of the main character, they can help young readers embrace culture, change and difference as they develop their identity and search for their own place in society.

The purpose of this paper is to pair two coming-of-age novels, one written by a Mexican American and the other written by a French Algerian, that explore the issues of belonging and isolation for two bicultural teens learning about culture as they grow up in a male-dominated society (and their resistance to male dominance). By comparing and contrasting the protagonists and analyzing the style and content of the novels, students in literature classes can gain insights into cultural difference and how cultural identity develops.

“The House on Mango Street,” Sandra Cisneros’s debut novel, is listed 11th in Listopia’s Female Bildungsromane [https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/95046.Female_Bildungsromane]. Listed 4th in Listopia’s Immigrant Experience Literature, it “shined a light on isolation in a multi-cultural context” in the Mexican-American population of the U.S. (Lopez Gonzalez). Faiza Guene’s debut novel “Kiffe-Kiffe Demain” (the title is “the positive melding of an Arab phrase meaning “same old, same old,” with French to mean things are always getting better” (Thomas)), deals with “integration, social rejection, and educational struggles as well as challenging gender dynamics,” which are a favorite topic of second generation Maghrebi-French women writers (Matu). By pairing Cisneros’s novel with the translation into English of Guene’s (“Kiffe-Kiffe Tomorrow”) the experiences described instantly become universal. Taken together the novels open discourse on dealing with feelings of “otherness,” isolation and belonging that are not limited to one ethnic group or one geographical space. They provide a rich source of comparisons and contrasts and points of departure for students to analyze and discuss the challenges of a bicultural identity, ethnic consciousness, and being on the outside looking in.

The two protagonists

Two high schoolgirls, one Mexican American and one French Moroccan, are each growing up in a deprived neighborhood. Esperanza lives in a house that she is ashamed of and in which she and her parents, sister and two brothers all share a bedroom. The neighborhood is in a large, dirty city (often assumed to be Chicago (e.g. Betz, Priewe)) where “there is too much sadness and not enough sky.” Doria’s tiny two-room apartment in the Paris

projects is in a gray concrete tower that “stays disgusting for weeks.” The elevator stinks and doesn’t work all the time.

How do the girls learn about the dominant culture and their cultural heritage, and how do they balance the two? How do they learn about the way to do things, and the attitudes, values, customs (e.g. clothes, music, cooking) of the groups to which they belong? While they live in the mainstream culture, aunts play an important role in both girls’ lives, and the two families have ties-albeit loose ones- to the old country.

The aunts represent the traditional culture while offering them coping strategies for living in the mainstream. Esperanza “has to find a way to bridge the gap between both her American and Mexican identity” (Ramirez). Her Aunt Lupe encourages her to keep writing: “It will keep you free,” she tells her. Three sisters, “las comadres,” (Wiggins calls them her “muses”) recognize that Esperanza is special. They invite her to make a wish and intuit that she wishes to leave the neighborhood. Encapsulating the theme of the book (Esperanza’s ties to Mango Street and her desire to leave it behind), the sisters tell her that when she leaves, she must remember to come back for the others: “You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street. You can’t erase what you know. You can’t forget who you are.”

Doria likes her Aunt Zohra from Algeria a lot because she’s “a real woman. A strong woman.” Doria describes how special the couscous, a traditional Algerian dish, that she prepares is: “what really makes it are the chickpeas and the very gentle way she prepares her semolina grains.” Aunt Zohra (not her real aunt but a long-time friend of her mother’s) tolerates her husband spending half the year with her and the other half with a second wife in the old country. As she explains, a man of his age “doesn’t really serve her purposes anyway.”

As for ties to old country, Esperanza has clearly been to Mexico as she comments on a house that she sees that reminds her of houses she has seen in Mexico. She can easily imagine her grandfather’s funeral, implying that she has attended one. Paralleling the description, Doria imagines the celebrations that will take place when her father’s new wife bears a son. Furthermore, she states that the last time they went back to Morocco, she was “wild-eyed and dazed.” Both girls talk about the difficulty some immigrants have in adapting to the new country.

As for the dominant culture, in addition to what they are learning at school the two girls read library books, and Doria watches a lot of television and rented videos. At the end of the novels, the protagonists have matured. Without rejecting their ethnic roots, they accept their place in the mainstream culture.

In addition to the challenges that all teenagers deal with such as the first kiss and typical teenage angst, both adolescents deal with prejudices because of their differences from the cultural mainstream, their language, and the color of their skin. Esperanza is told “I love you, Spanish girl” by a boy who grabbed her at the fairground and kissed and groped her, some say raped her (Priewe). At school they say her name funny as if the syllables were “made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth.” In Spanish, she says, her name is “made out of a softer something, like silver.” More poignantly, Esperanza notes that people who don’t know any better arrive in her neighborhood scared: “They think we will attack them with shiny knives.” But she and members of her community feel secure: “All brown all around, we are safe.”

The experiences of prejudices that Doria recounts are more frequent and more flagrant. In French class when she mispronounced a word the teacher accused her of “sullyng our beautiful language.” The teacher very pointedly commented, “It’s the faaaaultt of people like yooouu that our French herrritage is in a coma!” Doria recounts an incident from her childhood when some mostly full-blooded native French children wouldn’t hold her hand; it was the day after Eid, the festival of the sheep, and her mother had put henna on the palm of her left hand. “The morons thought I was dirty” Doria quips. When she gives the school principal a form with her mother’s “signature” he accuses her of forging it. Since her mother cannot write and isn’t used to holding a pen, she just made a squiggly line. Doria comments wryly, “He’s one of those people that thinks illiteracy is like AIDS. It only exists in Africa.” Both protagonists must deal with a male-dominant society. Esperanza, whose father is from Mexico, asserts that “the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don’t like their women strong.” Several of the females that Esperanza describes are trapped in relationships characterized by lack of freedom to come and go and domestic violence: Rafaela, who gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid she will run away since she is “too beautiful;” Sally, who is not supposed to dance for religious reasons, has to go straight home after school, and whose father beat her so badly one

day for talking to a boy that she couldn't go to school for several days; Minerva, whose husband "left and keeps leaving" and who comes to visit black and blue; and Alicia, who "is afraid of nothing except four-legged fur. And fathers."

Similarly, Doria describes several women who have been hit by their father or hit or abandoned by their husband. Samra (like Sally in Cisneros's novel) is held prisoner by her brother and father. Doria's own father left her mother to return to Morocco to find a new wife who could provide him with a son. Worse, though, Doria's father beat her. As is common in immigrant families where the children are literate in the mainstream language, Doria would fill out paperwork for her parents. One day she asked her father how they managed before she could read and write, and he thought she was "being a smartass" and he hit her and for a long time. But she didn't cry, she tells us, precisely because her dad thought girls were weak, that they were made for crying and doing dishes.

Still, both girls are strong, and though they recognize that life is different for boys, they are determined to make their own way. Early in the novel Esperanza claims that boys and girls live in separate worlds and that even her brothers, once outside, can't be seen talking to girls. She expresses her frustration by saying that she feels like a red balloon, "a balloon tied to an anchor." Later she exclaims that "Everything is holding its breath inside me. Everything is waiting to explode like Christmas. I want to be all new and shiny." Likewise, Doria notices that boys are treated differently from girls and muses, "I would have really liked to have been a boy. But fine, I'm a girl. A broad. A chick. A babe, even. I'll get used to it eventually." Elsewhere she remarks, "I just really would like to be someone else, somewhere else, and maybe in a whole different time."

Despite the roles they seem destined to play, the protagonists articulate their determination to forge their own identity and to be an inspiration for others. Esperanza says "I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain. ... I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure." Moreover, she recognizes her strength and claims that she is too strong for what Priewe refers to as "culturally inscribed gender roles" to keep her in the neighborhood forever. The novel ends with her saying she will go away and come back "for the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out." In like manner, Guene's novel ends with Doria announcing that she will lead the uprising in her neighborhood: "It will be an intelligent revolution, with no violence, where every person stands up to be heard."

Clearly the two novels form an interesting pairing and provide a variety of themes, experiences, and characters for students of literature to compare and to contrast. In addition, both novels are populated by male characters who are also searching for their place in the culture, but a discussion of the experiences is outside the scope of this paper.

A classroom activity

Structurally, the two works also offer a rich source of classroom activity for teaching literature. There is a classroom technique known in French as "un pastiche," in which a student writes in the style of an author in order to carefully analyze and assimilate the technique. Both "The House on Mango Street" and "Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow" comprise a collage of vignettes describing incidents, family members, friends, and other members of the girls' community. But Doria's voice, that of a "recalcitrant adolescent bucking against the unfairness of difficulties others have placed on her" (Kelleher), is more strident, feistier. Students can compare two incidents that have the same significance but that are treated differently. Alternatively, they can rewrite one of the incidents in the other girl's voice or describe a personal incident (real or imagined) in the style of their choice. The way the girls describe their clothes affords a good example of a source for this kind of classroom activity.

In the chapter entitled "Chanclas," which, according to Morin, means "footwear" with a connotation of the Mexican American working poor (J. Morin, personal communication: email, August 13, 2019), Esperanza describes her discomfort at being asked to dance at a baptism party:

Everybody laughing except me, because I'm wearing the new dress, pink and white with stripes, and new underclothes and new socks and the old saddle shoes I wear to school, brown and white, the kind I get every September because they last long and they do. My feet scuffed and round, the heels all crooked that look dumb with this dress, so I just sit. (47)

Cisneros portrays the shame a young girl feels when she must wear her worn out serviceable school shoes with a new dress. One critic reads more into the scene, asserting that this is an example of domestic entrapment and that the

girl's shame is because she does not have high heeled shoes "to make her feet look small and pretty" (Burcar). Doria, who is much poorer than Esperanza, only has secondhand clothes, which she describes in several places: "Take this hoodie I'm wearing right now, not even the Salvation Army would want it." In the same chapter she tells of a sweatshirt her mother paid a euro for in a secondhand store that she wore to school. It turned out to be a pajama top with "sweet dreams" written on it in English (which she couldn't read) and the other girls at school never let her hear the end of it. In a later chapter Doria recounts how people were staring at a stain on her jacket that caused her to feel "hchouma" (arab for shame, disgrace, indecency). Making it worse, it was the only jacket she had that didn't "look too ratty." If she wears any of the others, she informs us, "everybody calls me "Cosette" from Les Miserables."

Conclusion

Promoting diversity in literature has been identified as a concurrent trend in both library science and education, especially in the context of young adult fiction (Biar). Moreover, "cultural literacy," defined as "a knowledge of and appreciation for difference in worldview, culture, and opinion," has been promoted to educate students, both minority and mainstream, through multiethnic young adult literature (Lesuma). In this article I have paired two debut coming-of-age novels by women of hyphenated identity written 30 years apart on two different continents to allow students of literature to gain insights into growing up poor in a bicultural environment. Comparing, contrasting, analyzing style and content afford students in literature classes the opportunity to understand cultural differences, how cultural identity develops, and the paths adolescents can take to shape their place in society.

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