

# Multicultural Literature for Multicultural Education: Idealism, Reality and Practicality in a Thai Tertiary Education Context

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Received 12/09/2021	<b>Abstract</b>  The authors of this paper argue that to promote multicultural education, multicultural literature can be a very useful tool. Since the ultimate goal of multicultural education is to achieve a more equal and more inclusive society, the literature of Southeast Asia, regarded as the true <i>minority</i> literature, should be seriously taken into consideration. Southeast Asian literature in English has advantages in terms of its local and universal characteristics, allowing students to explore the multicultural world and enhance their understanding of it. Unfortunately, in Thailand, English literature is usually not implemented in EFL classes in which the main focus is the drilling and development of four language skills. English literature classes, on the other hand, strongly emphasize
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	the British and American literature, without much room for non Anglo-American literature. It is therefore proposed that to promote the diversity of literary texts and to enhance students' multicultural learning experience, teachers and educators could incorporate the English literature of our neighboring countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam and the Philippines in their syllabi and exploit it in their pedagogical approaches. It is hoped that the inclusion of multicultural literature will help lead Thai learners and teachers alike to the ultimate goal of multicultural education.
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## Introduction

To some language teachers, using literary texts as a tool to enhance their students' language and critical thinking skills may seem slightly far-fetched. The idea that literature contains such difficult language and that literature includes topics that at times are controversial and even forbidden, may prevent them from implementing those texts in their English classrooms. Undoubtedly, the benefits of literature in EFL and ESL classroom are widely known and thoroughly discussed in the academic circle. However, most, if not all, language teachers in Thailand tend to lend more emphasis on language accuracy and near-native accent, willing to make literature merely a secondary set of educational tools and to neglect the benefit of literature education altogether.

Given the concepts of multicultural education, it is time that language teachers revisit the rationale of having literary texts as part of their pedagogical practices. In this paper, the relationship between multicultural literature and multicultural education will be primarily discussed. The challenges of implementing literary texts to promote multicultural education in Thailand, using Thai universities as a case study, will be addressed. In the final part of the paper, propositions on how literary texts can be used to cultivate a more inclusive learning environment for Thai students will also be made

## Multicultural Education: Definition and Characteristics

Multicultural education has continued to receive scholastic attention and attempts have been made to define what it is. According to the National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME), multicultural education is defined as “a philosophical concept built on the ideals of freedom, justice, equality, equity and human dignity” and has an ultimate goal to prepare students “to work actively toward structural equality in organizations and institutions by providing the knowledge, dispositions, and skills for the redistribution of power and income among diverse groups” (NAME, retrieved April 2021). In other words, it aims to instill democratic values and beliefs and to encourage students to recognize cultural pluralism in a culturally diverse society (Aydin, 2013). Ideally, all the students, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity or wealth, should be given equal opportunities to receive education and to protect their cultural heritage (Bennett, 1999).

To promote multicultural education effectively, educators are required to be socially and culturally competent and they must place ethnicity and cultural literacy at the centre of their teaching process. The legacy, experiences and viewpoints of different cultures should also be the highlight of the learning environment for the purpose of terminating racism, prejudices, sexism and other types of discrimination (Banks, 1989). Gorski (2010) posits that in multicultural education, four concerns have to be taken into account: diversity of learning styles, content of topic, inclusivity and social and civic responsibility. It is hoped that multicultural education would help change society for the better.

To accentuate the greater significance of multicultural education in the globalized world, it is worth mentioning the four visions of curriculum ideology deployed in the national education plan of the US. They are the scholar academic ideology, the social efficiency ideology, the learner centered ideology and the social reconstruction ideology (Schiro, 2013, pp. 4-7). The following table provides the definitions of each vision:

**Table 1***Four visions of curriculum ideology and their definitions*

<b>Curriculum ideology</b>	<b>Definition</b>
The scholar academic ideology	The acquisition of new knowledge, conceptual frameworks and ways of thinking
The social efficiency ideology	The ability to respond to the needs of society by training learners to function as contributing members of society.
The learner centered ideology	The priority of needs, concerns and growth of individuals
The social reconstruction ideology	The recreation of a more equal society for the maximum satisfactions of its member

While the goal of multicultural education fits with all the visions, it seems to resonate well with the fourth vision which is to create a society with inclusiveness and equality of all race, gender, language and culture. Education is therefore meant to make people happier and enable them to grow individually, instead of just becoming the workforce to drive the country's economy.

### **Multicultural literature: Establishing the scope**

Although the term 'literature' is relatively common in the academic circle, to ensure it is correctly understood by all, this study refers to the definition provided by Britannica. Literature signifies "a body of written works traditionally applied to those imaginative works of poetry and prose" (retrieved December 2021).

The benefits of literature have been extensively scrutinised and there is little doubt that literature is not only a worthy subject for English major students but also an appropriate tool for ESL and/ or EFL classrooms. However, to properly explain how beneficial literature is to multicultural education, it is worth considering the extent to which multicultural literature should be defined, what contributions it can have and how they will be able to assist educators and learners to achieve the goals of multicultural education.

By definition, multicultural literature is the literature written by minority authors (Aerila, Soininen & Merisuo-Storm, 2016). Therefore, broadly speaking, African-American writers such as Toni Morrison and

Alice Walker can be considered as such. In the same way, Asian British authors such as Kazuo Ishiguro or Hanif Kureishi fit the above definition. Interestingly, while they may be considered minorities in their countries of origin, they are included as part of the Western literary canon that has long dominated the global literary scene. In literature syllabi, both in Thailand and overseas, the works written by famous Black writers from the US, for example, are usually selected for class discussion and assignments (Examples include courses *American fiction from the twentieth century to the present* offered by the Department of English, Chulalongkorn University and *Contemporary multi-ethnic writing of America* by the University of Bristol, UK). Some of the works such as Morrison's *The bluest eye* and *Beloved* have also been translated into Thai to reach the larger audience. This inevitably suggests that even the marginalised works can still be divided into the centre and the periphery. That is, Black minority literature in the US or UK seems to hold a better, more central position than that from other parts of the world, i.e. Africa or the Caribbean.

Therefore, the definitions of *minorities* pose an important challenge and need to be called into question in terms of inclusiveness. Take Southeast Asian literature as an example. Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines are the countries where national literature is written in both English and local languages. However, in Thailand, as reflected in their curricula, the promotion of Southeast Asian literature in English has not been sufficiently done even at well-established universities such as Thammasat University where English literature is taught as a major discipline for undergraduate and postgraduate students. In this paper, we argue that to make multicultural literature truly multicultural and inclusive, the literatures of less famous, lesser known authors from a wider range of countries must be part of the academic dialogue and included in our curriculum design and implementation.

### Multicultural Literature in Multicultural Education: A Possibility for Change

In an EFL or ESL class, literary texts can and should be used as tools to develop students' language skills. As the literary language is embellished and polished, it exposes the students to a different linguistic genre and gives them the experience of reading the unfamiliar language.

On the other hand, in a literature class, characters and characterization, symbols and social issues form the central discussion. Critical thinking and social skills are enhanced through such discussion experiences as students learn to make contributions, share ideas and at the same time to listen to others' opinions that they may not necessarily agree to.

For multicultural education, the potential of literature education can be pushed further. As Banks and Banks (2007) propose, multicultural education can be implemented at a different level. For the lowest level, multiculturalism can be taught through food, tourism and party such as introducing different religious and holiday events to familiarize students with a foreign culture. The higher level can be done through the reading of folktales as a way to introduce a variety of customs and beliefs. No evaluation is expected at this level. The more integrative approach to using literature in multicultural education is when students are encouraged to investigate topics and concepts on ethnicity and culture, aiming to instill the understanding and empathy for other people in society. The highest level of multicultural education can be achieved when readers of multicultural literature become socially and culturally awakened and seek a better, more just society.

Thus, it appears that multicultural education and multicultural literature do have the common goals which are to enhance profound understanding and awareness of different societies and cultures and unique experiences that are associated with them. Multicultural educators hope to create a fairer, more democratic society. Through the promotion of multicultural literature, learners can be taught to develop empathy and sympathy through the lenses of characters and their diverse situations. Given the authors' social preoccupations and the readers' exposure to cultural diversity embedded in the texts, multicultural literature can certainly be of great use to promote multicultural education and a more inclusive society.

### **Implementing Multicultural Literature in Thai Universities: Against the Pedagogical Current**

In Thailand, English has always been taught as a compulsory foreign language. According to the Ministry of Education policy, at least nine credits of English must be taught at the tertiary level; 6 credits go to foundation courses and the other 3 (or 6) go to English for specific

purposes (ESP) or English for academic purposes (EAP) (Darasawang, 2007). At King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, for example, students are required to study two fundamental courses (English I and II) and then one elective course chosen for them by their respective departments. The courses offered are mostly work-related and communication-related such as Oral Communication, English for Workplace Communication and English for Employment. Similarly, at Chulalongkorn University, medical students are required to complete six credits of Experiential English I and II and the other six for English for Medical Profession I and II. Below is the table providing an overview for English courses available for students at different universities in Thailand:

**Table 2**

*List of English courses offered by different Thai universities*

Universities	Credits required for English	Credits for compulsory foundation courses	Foundation course titles	Credits for compulsory ESP courses	Examples of ESP/EAP courses
Chulalongkorn University	12	6	Experiential English I & II	6	English for medical profession I & II Technical writing for engineering English for sports science I & II
King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang	12	6	Foundation English I & II	6	English for academic purposes English for communication
Srinakarinwirot University	12	6	English for Effective Communication I & II	6	English for specific purposes I & II English for Communication Design I & II
King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi	9	6	General English Academic English	3	English for workplace communication Oral Communication English for employment

As can be seen, the teaching and learning of English serves mainly as a tool for national and economic development, which fits the second curriculum ideology, the social efficiency ideology. It should come to no surprise therefore that Thai undergraduate students have such little exposure to the study of literature, let alone multicultural literature and multicultural education as a whole. Possible reasons include students' own proficiency and interest, curriculum practicality and societal and occupational requirements after graduation. So, it seems that literature is not a course to be prioritized nor is it a widely studied or popular subject. It would usually be taken by those majoring specifically in English. However, should one take a closer look into the curriculum of English or English studies, available at over 100 institutions in the country, one may be surprised to discover that those universities would require their students to study merely two or three required literature-related courses with one or two optional courses available. Among these, only one public university, Thammasat University, offers a full degree in English literature and it would be interesting to research further into the number of existing students.

To provide a clearer microcosm of literary studies in Thailand, two oldest, debatably most prestigious universities, Chulalongkorn University and Thammasat University where the discipline of English literature is taught comparatively more extensive, are further discussed. While the former offers a variety of courses in English and American literature for the English major students, the latter offers a full degree. Below are some of the courses that are currently available and regularly offered (see for more detail <https://www.arts.chula.ac.th/english/ba-program/curriculum/>; <https://arts.tu.ac.th/uploads/%20สาขาวิชาภาษาอังกฤษและวรรณคดีอังกฤษ%20หลักสูตรปรับปรุง%20พ.ศ.2561.pdf>):

**Table 3**

*Literature courses on offer by Chulalongkorn and Thammasat University*

Universities	English-American literature courses	Non-Anglo-American literature courses
Chulalongkorn	British literature American literature Mythological and biblical background to English literature	Contemporary world literature in English



Universities	English-American literature courses	Non-Anglo-American literature courses
	19 <sup>th</sup> century British fiction 19 <sup>th</sup> century American literature British poetry from the Elizabethans to the Augustans The poetry of rebellion: The Romantics and the Victorians British fiction from the 20 <sup>th</sup> century to the present Shakespeare	
Thammasat	British literature American literature Bible and classical mythology 19th century British and American literature Modernist literature Literature from Elizabethan to Augustan period British and American Romantic literature Shakespeare	World masterpieces Literature and minorities Postcolonial literature Seminar on non-Anglo-American writers

The majority of courses shown in Table 3 are dominated by the British and American literature of different historical periods. They are in general Anglo and American-centric by nature. While there is one non-Anglo American literature course available at Chulalongkorn, alarmingly there are merely a few of such courses available at Thammasat. Needless to say, not much emphasis is given to the *peripheral* authors of other English-speaking countries, systematically rendering them less visible in the literary academic circle as a whole. In addition, the shortage of academic staff and the lack of expertise may be one crucial reason why the literatures of other countries are not taught widely and extensively.

Some scholars in the EFL/ESL/English literature fields in Thailand may argue that these Anglo-American literature courses are the essential bases for English major students to master and familiarize with before they explore a wider variety of English literary texts of other countries. While that proposition cannot be rejected altogether given the dominating significance of Anglo-American literature, two important questions remain to be answered as in what ideology is behind the making of literature curriculum and what one can do to promote the inclusion of multicultural literature in our syllabi.

### Multicultural Literature from Southeast Asia: A Quick Overview

Southeast Asian literature in English, among other writings from the sub-continent, Africa and the Caribbean, known as Commonwealth literature, has attracted recognition from academics in the field of postcolonial literature. They have addressed and scrutinized the issues related to the once-called *third world* literature (Ako, 2004). Publications on Southeast Asian literature have been on the rise (examples include Patke & Holden's *The Routledge concise history of Southeast Asian writing in English* (2009) and Chin & Daud (Eds.)'s *The Southeast Asian woman writes back: Gender, identity and nation in the literatures of Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines* (2018) among others). Despite the attempts made by scholars in Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore and Malaysia, Thai university students and lecturers alike seem to have little exposure to the writings of our English-speaking neighbors arguably due to the lack of emphasis.

As former colonies of the Western imperialists, Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines have a substantial number of literary works in English authored by the locals. This has given Southeast Asian literature in English a unique position. That is, the authors could employ the geographical settings, specific historical events and specific group of people in their literary production to narrate their stories and to portray the human experiences which are universal. In this section, a brief overview on the literature of Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam and the Philippines is provided.

Singaporean authors have been officially supported by the government as part of the Arts and Culture Strategic Review (ACSR). Funding has been provided to support the growth of literary arts and literary awards have been initiated by both public and private sectors (National Arts Council, 2018). For example, Epigram, an influential publishing house, annually organizes a literary award for best fiction. Therefore, Singapore literature in English can be regarded as rich and diverse in terms of its themes, issues and writing styles. Singapore's well-established authors include Catherine Lim, Suchen Christine Lim, Stella Kon, Goh Poh Seng, Philip Jeyaretnam and Rex Shelly. A growing body of new voices is also complementing the literary circles of the country.

Those include Hwee Hwee Tan, Amanda Lee Koe, Kevin Kwan and Balli Kaur Jaswal whose writings have gained international recognition. Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians* (2013), to illustrate, has received an international acclaim and made into a Hollywood movie. The works from Singapore encapsulate the issues faced by the locals in their tiny city state, ranging from nation building, and loss and/or confusion of identity to gender and sexuality and migration. Seng's *If we dream too long* (1972), for instance, deals with an individual's sense of alienation in the face-paced society where people are constantly competing for success. Lim's *Fistful of Colours* (1992) portrays the multi-layered, multiracial nature of Singapore and the characters' existential struggles. Modern works such as Koe's *The Ministry of Moral Panic* (2013) depict a more rebellious, subversive set of characters that seek to defy the strict social rules of Singapore.

Malaysian literature in English is definitely on the rise in the international stage. Several contemporary authors such as Tash Aw, Beth Yahp, Rani Manicka, Tan Twan Eng, Kee Thuan Chye and Bernice Chauly are internationally successful and their works revolve around the challenging issues that modern Malaysia is encountering: history, war, politics, identity, racial conflicts, as well as Islamism. Manicka's *The Rice Mother* (2004), to illustrate, centers on a Sri-Lankan female migrant to Malaysia who becomes the supreme matriarch of her extended family. Through her life, the history of Malaysia is narrated and the compromises the country is forced to make in order to survive the war and its consequences. Chye's controversial play, *1984: Here and Now*, features dystopian Malaysia where racial discrimination and segregation are the state's official policy. This is a fictional analogy to the introduction of *Bumiputera* in the 1970s that favours the Malay race over other racial groups. Those who resist the government, even with cognitive disobedience, are imprisoned, a familiar scenario in Orwell's *1984*. Furthermore, notable works by Malaysian authors have been praised by international readership. Aw's *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005), longlisted for the Man Booker Prize, portrays the historical accounts of Malaysia under the British rule including the Chinese migration and the Japanese occupation of Malaya.

Although the English literature of Brunei Darussalam may not be as rich compared to Malaysia and Singapore, some authors have managed to put a spotlight on the oil-rich nation. Amir Faliq, Kathrina Mohd Daud and K.H. Lim are among the new authors whose novels help

shed light onto the Bruneian history, society and culture. Falique's *The Forlorn Adventure* (2013) draws an idealistic picture of what a small country could ever hope for: to reach the outer space. While the novel contains a fantasy element, it reinforces the nation's core ideology: *Melayu, Islam and Beraja* (MIB) (Daud, 2019). That is the long-cultivated identity of Malay Islamic Monarchy. Daud's novel, *The Fisherman King* (2020), finalist for the Epigram prize, combines the local folklore and the national history prior to the advent of Islam. It also deals with universal themes such as greed and sacrifices. Lim's *Written in Black* (2015) tells the story of a boy who comes of age and takes a journey through the backwaters of Brunei.

The other Southeast Asian country, the Philippines, is never to be forgotten. Having been through the Spanish and American colonization, the country has distributed a large number of literary works in English to the world. It would in fact do Filipino literature in English justice if a separate study should be dedicated to it. However, for a brief introduction, Filipino authors have produced a large, abundant body of literature in English and they have touched upon the compelling, urgent issues that millions and millions of Filipinos, both in and outside the country, are encountering on a daily basis: history of one corruption after another, violence, migration, domestic abuse and poverty. Migration and the experience, mostly negative, of overseas domestic workers are the focal points in a lot of books. Jose Dalisay's *Soledad Sister* (2007) begins with the dead body of a female migrant worker being flown back to the Philippines from a Middle-Eastern country. This seems to be a common phenomenon for millions of impoverished people who are forced to leave their families behind and journey to different parts of the world where unknown fate and possible cruelty are awaiting them. Better known in the West, *Dogeaters* (1990) by Jessica Hagedorn depicts the Philippines and the people under the dictatorship of President Marcos. The book also addresses, and satirizes, a variety of social issues such as Imelda Marcos's collection of shoes and people's obsession of beauty pageants. Moreover, one of the most famous works, Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart* (1946) recalls his own experience as a migrant in the US in the 1930s in which the attitudes towards Asian migrants were very hostile.

From the above examples of works from different Southeast Asian countries, it can be argued that despite the specific contexts in

which the works were produced, the issues and the themes conveyed through the stories are undoubtedly universal. The unbearable experience of migrants, the suffering of men and women, the coming-of-age experience of teenagers, the political and moral corruption and the sense of alienation are parts of shared human experience that all of us can identify with. This explains why the English literatures of Southeast Asian countries deserve a lot more recognition from English and English literature scholars, researchers and teachers in Thailand alike.

### **Bringing Home Multicultural Literature from Southeast Asia: Some Practical Guidelines and Benefits**

To completely change an existing curriculum is a long, impractical and unnecessarily complicated process that would require serious discussion and involve relevant parties such as policy makers, curriculum designers and those in the Ministry of Education. However, English and English literature teachers in Thailand can exploit the literary texts from different sources and countries of origin to suit their teaching environment and to enhance students' better understanding of what multicultural education is trying to achieve.

The easiest and most practical step to take is to incorporate some of the Southeast Asian literary texts into their existing materials. Researching the authors, their accepted works and the contexts around which the works were written would not only benefit the teachers but also the learners. Since literature is usually written as a reflection of society, those employing literary texts can take advantage of the countless benefits that come with. Class discussion can start from the specific context or setting of a chosen text and it can then expand into a more general, more universal subject matter.

Combining the syllabus, utilizing both Anglo American literary texts and non-Anglo American, in this case Southeast Asian, texts can therefore be a win-win situation for all the parties involved. An example of what one can do easily and promptly is to teach Kee Thuan Chye's *1984: Here and now* along with Orwell's *1984*. This will allow the students to get insights into the dystopian world, see and compare the tropes and contexts as well as analyze the relevant themes and all the literary elements. Students will also be given the opportunity to explore the notion of racial segregation, prejudice and suppression of freedom of

speech in a context that is close and familiar to home. Another example is the coming-of-age theme for which teachers can use both Salinger's *The catcher in the Rye* and Kim's *Written in Black* as the main texts for a comparative analysis. Although written in different periods of time by different authors coming from the two sides of the world, the shared trope, a journey, can be analyzed to enhance students' views of the world. Last but not least, to instill a sense of sympathy in students, Dalisay's *Soledad Sister* can be used together with other Western texts to introduce students to the world of emigrants who are not only victimized by their destiny but also mistreated by their society. The reading experience will hopefully teach students to develop understanding about others and urge them to take action to make changes.

To ensure the best results, teachers are expected to be resourceful and selective. They are to make good judgements when it comes to designing the syllabus and choosing the appropriate text that can induce learners to discuss a variety of matters in the hope that those learners would become more sympathetic, more understanding and more participatory towards justice and equality for all the members in society. In addition, in opting for these true minority authors and texts, teachers can help take part in promoting the literary diversity and encouraging those forgotten authors to thrive.

## Conclusion

Multicultural education requires a multitude of people, knowledge, and resources to achieve its goal. It also requires those involved to open for change and new possibility and to be ready to tackle pedagogical challenges and norms. In this paper, we have argued for the inclusion of multicultural literature in Thailand's English and English literature classes to allow both the teachers and students to explore the peripheral, forgotten yet deserving and rich body of non-Anglo American literature in English. We have provided a quick overview of some literary works from the neighboring countries where colonial ties with Great Britain and the US have resulted in literature written in English. With similar demographic, geographical and cultural traits, Thai students can learn about the countries that surround them and identify what we may have in common. They can also develop further understanding about those countries' history, socio-economic conditions, as well as similarities

and differences. Using those texts will also allow the students to explore the universality and intertextuality of literature across the world.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the introduction of Southeast Asian writing in English into Thailand's curricula as put forward by this paper does not imply that Southeast Asian literature is worthier than the literatures of other previously colonised countries. This paper argues only that the literature of Southeast Asia belongs to Thailand's neighbouring countries and that it has unfortunately been overlooked for too long. Especially now that the ASEAN economic community has been promoted, it is high time educators, researchers and students alike recognised the values and implications that those writings have borne. In addition, as argued earlier, the literature of Southeast Asia is rich, extensive and certainly complicated. This paper asserts that its existence be acknowledged and incorporated into Thailand's English/English literature curricula. Once it receives the attention it deserves, further categorisation should be made. For example, lecturers and curriculum designers can divide writings based on the ethnicity and/or race of the authors. Filipino literature, for instance, may have to be defined later as Filipino-Chinese or Filipino-American.

Last but not least, the argument of this paper should not be taken as an attack on the existing curriculum adopted by the universities in Thailand. Neither does it call for a complete turnover of the curriculum. Instead, the paper seeks to remind English and English teachers of the existence of *other* English writings especially ones written by our neighboring authors. The argument made in this paper is also aimed at encouraging the teachers, curriculum designers and policy makers to look beyond English as merely a subject that serves the ideology of social efficiency alone. The incorporation of English literary texts from Southeast Asia, therefore, is one step closer to the fulfilment of the remaining curriculum ideologies and the goal of multicultural education.

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