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AUTOBIOGRAPHIES AS A MEANS OF FACILITATING MULTICULTURAL LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

A culturally diverse classroom needs a different and more innovative approach towards the students. It is very important to create a common ground for students to come to comprehension about each other's culture as well as an outside culture. To create cross-cultural understanding among the diversified group as well to give them exposure to the outside cultures and issues, introducing autobiographies in the course content can be a fruitful gesture. It can help in developing the most needed cultural awareness about other cultures through an authentic, personified voice of an eminent narrator can prove a catalyst to one's understanding about cultures which are different. As the autobiography negotiates between the past of the individual in a society and his present reflections, it can be an intricate picture of the past and the present of the society and its people. The present paper discusses the possibilities in using autobiographies as the media for creating cross-cultural understanding in the multicultural classroom. Introduction of such texts can bring in vital plurality and productive diversity in the classroom.

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Today, the world has become a global village, a multicultural world. Multiculturalism is not a new phenomenon in India because this land has always been multicultural culturally, linguistically and even genetically. Amalgamation of several cultural strands is quite old in Indian ethos compared to many dominant countries in the world which are basically monolingual. In India, up to the formation of linguistic states, the doctrine of mono-linguism has never been one of the established modes of existence. And in spite of predomination of linguistic boundaries that drew various state lines, it would have been difficult to find any land, which was purely mono-lingual or mono-cultural. People from many different religions, castes, races and cultural traditions have lived here, though not harmoniously, for centuries together. Various terminologies are in use today for signifying a multicultural space, like plural, multiethnic or polytechnic society to metaphor like 'melting pot' (McNergney & Herbert).

Due to the globalized tendency of today's world the education system and daily practice of teaching has also undergone several fundamental transformations. In case of India which always has been a space multilingual and multicultural, forging some common platform for students becomes very crucial. Multicultural education plays a fundamental role in a society like India, which is an amalgamation of various cultures.



Multicultural education recognizes various cultures, plurality of the society and it helps in bringing marginalized communities in the mainstream. Unfortunately in India the education provided in the school is unbalanced. It generally gives major space to the dominant cultural values of the majority group and has very limited, in some cases no representation of different cultural strands in Indian terrain. The result is that when the students come across the people or other students from different cultures they perceive them with the general, prejudice-ridden, stereotypical view, which widens the gap between them. Eventually many of them overcome these cultural hurdles and accept each other. But if certain deliberate and organized changes are made in the education they are given, in a way to facilitate the cross-cultural understanding and necessary dialogue which was somewhat absent before can generate a very positive atmosphere in students which will help in their intellectual and moral development. According to my own experience, compared to the provincial colleges where there is somewhat identical population of students in case of language and culture, the national institutes like TISS where I am working currently the linguistic, cultural diversity becomes very evident and the tension it creates is also very conspicuous. Developing a perspective which will sensitise students of each other's cultures as well as the cultures outside becomes very important in a place like this. Education is an integral part of social policy. Fostering tolerance, understanding and proper knowledge about the cultures around the world can be achieved through putting the course content in proper perspective. If they are given time and space to pay attention to these aspects in their formative years the students can prove a vital force in bringing about social integration and bridging the cultural gap.

Culture is the term very hard to define. Raymond Williams puts it as "Culture is ordinary"(3-14). Many social scientists consider culture as comprised primarily of the symbolic and impalpable aspects of human society. Values, symbols, interpretations and perspectives distinguish one people from another (Banks). People belonging to the same culture may have similar beliefs, values, symbols, etc. A multicultural society is not just a society where some cultures exist together. Baumann provides an apt definition of a multicultural society: "A multicultural society is not a patchwork of five or ten fixed cultural identities, but an elastic web of crosscutting and always mutually situational identifications"(118). Another aspect is that cultural groups are internally plural and that symbols and values are open to negotiation and are changeable depending on the context. An individual can be a part of various cultural groups at the same time.

Table 1: Multiple Group Memberships

Race/Ethnicity		Gender
Religion	Individual	Age
Nationality		Social Clan

*\*Adapted from Banks, 1994.*

Its apparent from this diagrammatic representation that how "elastic", negotiable and fluid one's cultural identity can become according to the various cultural groups a person may belong to. As said earlier education can be an anchor for students to understand this fluidity of cultural identities and the reasons behind it. Rena Lewis and Donald Door lag give the reasons for introducing multicultural content in education:

1. Commonalities among people cannot be recognized unless differences are acknowledged.
2. A society that interweaves the best of all its cultures reflects a truly mosaic image.
3. Multicultural education can restore cultural rights by emphasizing cultural equality and respect.
4. Students can learn basic skills while also learning to respect cultures; multicultural education need not detract from basic education.
5. Students must learn to respect others.

Incorporating all these ideas and sticking to the normal mode of teaching is not possible. To assimilate these things in the course content some fundamental change is necessary in the way one looks not only at the course syllabus but at the students too along with the teacher. This makes classroom teaching a challenging job for a teacher in a highly multicultural classroom. Observing cultural and linguistic tensions in an Indian classroom is an interesting experience. Whenever there is a discussion about the stereotypes, prejudices about different regions in India the nervous energy in the classroom is palpable. Here, using deliberate strategies to

create understanding between diverse student population becomes a necessity. Here in TISS the bachelor social science students get exposed to the theoretical aspects constituting a society through various culturally specific examples, fieldwork etc. But still, as I have observed such kind of neutral, conceptual knowledge fails to create an acknowledgement of the cultural diversities and respect for these. There is still denial in accepting the social condition of disparity that is, acknowledgement of privileges enjoyed by the mainstream and denial of socioeconomically and culturally oppressed, marginal sections of society. Here, language and literature can provide that particular space to the students for relating general to specific, connecting the objective with the subjective. By giving human face to the information provided students will become sensitized and it will lead to cross-cultural understanding.

James Bank, an education expert who has extensively worked in multicultural education provides a five dimensional model for introducing multicultural dynamics in education:

1. Content Integration: the extent to which teachers use a variety of information from diverse cultures and groups to convey key concepts, principles, generalizations, and theories in subjects area.
2. Knowledge Construction: the extent to which teacher help students understand how knowledge is created and how it is influenced by a variety of cultural and social-class groups.
3. Prejudice Reduction: focuses on student's racial (*discriminatory*) attitudes and how they can be modified.
4. Equity Pedagogy: teacher's use of variety of teaching styles consistent with learning styles of cultural and ethnic groups.
5. Empowering School Culture: restructuring and reorganizing culture of schools to include and empower "diverse racial, ethnic, language and social groups. (Banks, 4-6)

Following the first step of this five dimensional model by introducing autobiographies in the course content of a multicultural classroom can prove an effective tool for promoting interculturality leading to social cohesion in the diverse student population. The reason behind this will be that students will gain a personalized view of the cultures depicted by the writer along with the complexities of autobiographical format which is going to be discussed in the next segment of the paper. But this reformation or any other reformation of the syllabus as such, requires active inquiry and development of new knowledge and understanding of the historical contributions of the contemporary and past ethnic groups to the current body of knowledge and academic disciplines by the educators.(Wiles & Brondi). If autobiographical works are carefully selected and put in the syllabus in organized way the other two dimensions given by Banks, namely 'Knowledge Construction' and 'Prejudice' Reduction' can be completed easily. But to achieve this the fourth dimension will be the key factor. Educators should be aware of the cultural backgrounds of the students so that they can effectively experiment with different learning styles. If these factors are taken care of the class will be a positive and nurturing space for the participants. Multicultural education facilitated through autobiographies can lead to many positive changes in the students. According to Gloria M. Amney-Dixon the goals of the global perspective of multicultural education can be summarized as follows:

Table 2: Goals of Global Perspective of Multicultural Education  
(Gloria M. Amney-Dixon,6).

Goal 2: To develop multiple historical perspectives.		Goal 3: To strengthen cultural consciousness and to strengthen intercultural competence.
	Goal 1: To develop - Responsibility to the world community. - Reverence to the earth. - Acceptance and appreciation of cultural diversity. - Respect for human dignity.	

Goal 5: To increase awareness of the state of the planet and global dynamics.		Goal 4: To combat racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice and discrimination, and to build social action skills.
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When we consider that autobiographical narratives can provide students or the reader a better understanding of the culture depicted, we should also be aware of the limitations of autobiographical truth. Autobiography is in itself quite a nuanced, multifaceted and complex form of writing. When a person is writing about his/her self – his/her past experiences in the present, it is not just chronicle of events or documentation, but it is their current understanding about their past. Thus autobiography is a reflective and retrospective form of writing about oneself. As Ernesto Che Guevara says in his autobiographical account 'Motorcycle diaries', "The person who wrote these notes passed away the moment his feet touched Argentine soil. The person who reorganizes and polishes them, me, is no longer, at least I am not the person I once was. All this wandering around "Our America with a capital A" has changed me more than I thought"(32). This single sentence can epitomize the gist of the character of autobiographical writing. Autobiographical narratives cannot be treated as historical documents. They may contain information regarding "fact", but they incorporate these facts into subjective "truth". So, the auto biographer presents a subjective account of the "big picture". According to Smith and Watson : "When life narrators write to chronicle an event, to explore a certain time period, or to enshrine a community, they are making "history" in a sense. But they are also performing several rhetorical acts: justifying their own perceptions, upholding their reputations, disputing their accounts of others, settling scores, conveying cultural information, and inventing desirable futures, among others" (13).

As Smith and Watson suggest "conveying cultural information" and "inventing desirable futures" are one of the several tasks an auto biographer performs. These are the aspects which are most important while introducing autobiographies in a classroom. As far as the autobiographical truth is concerned, one has to understand that it will always remain subjective. In his autobiography titled as "The Autobiography of W. E. DuBois : A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of its First Century", he acknowledges the limitations of the autobiographies as not being "indisputable authorities":

"Memory fails especially in small details, so that it becomes finally but a theory of my life, with much forgotten and misconceived, with valuable testimony but often less than absolutely true, despite my intention... This book then the soliloquy of an old man on what he dreams his life has been as he sees it slowly drifting away; and what he would like others to believe"(12-13).

Remembering is one of the important features of an autobiography, which comes in it as a " re-interpretation of the past in the present." (Smith and Watson,22). The remembering subject actively creates the meaning of the past in the act of remembering(Rose). The act of remembering is not always a specifically subjective because each culture also has different means to collective remembering. Individual can be a part of various cultural groups at the same time. As it was shown in the multiple group membership diagram (1), it depends on the positioning of the person who is doing the act of remembering. Communities can also promote and cultivate their own means, sites, archives, and channels of remembering. A narrator can employ different modes of remembering in his/her narrative. Sometimes it can be personal like dreamed, family stories, photos, and some can be collective like newspapers, public documents, rituals etc.

Thus, the act of remembering becomes relational and contextual, making it inter subjective. W.J.T. Mitchell claims that, " Memory is an inter subjective phenomenon, a practice not only of recollection of a past by a single subject, but of recollection for another subject" (193). The narrator is trying to pass on something of his/her life and times to the posterity. He or she may think that whatever they are writing through this act of remembering has the potential to influence and affect the future of others. Thus, they are reactivating the past through not only writing it down but writing about it. So, the act oof remembering becomes social ad

collective. As M.M. Bakhtin suggests: " Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated- overpopulated- with the intensions of others."

The multicultural classroom can be greatly benefitted by the use of autobiographies from the people belonging to different national and international locations. As discussed before it cannot be sure of the authenticity of the narrative, but the narrative still carries an impression of the values, morals, interpretations, beliefs of his or her culture. If put into proper [respective in front of the students by an informed and judicious educator. While learning in their formative years students should be able to understand their own position in society as well as of others. Through practical subjects narrating their own stories in historical, cultural, social, geological and political space and time, students can gain an insight about the dynamics of the society. This interculturality produced by the informed reading of autobiographies will give them cultural competency leading to social cohesion. Following points are developed from the work of Bhiku Parekh(336-344):

1. Students should be aware that all individual beings are culturally embedded and they grow up and live within a culturally structured world and organize their lives and social relations in terms of culturally derived systems and meanings of significance. Reading autobiographies of diverse people from different regional, cultural and social background will create awareness about the cultural differences and the reasons behind it. It will give them a comprehensive picture of their society. They will try to understand the values and beliefs of the people from the different caste, class, ethnic group, country etc. As the autobiographies will give them more personal and inner picture of the initially unfamiliar culture and people they will be able to relate to them at the basic human level. Such development of personal attachment with the narrative can facilitate better understanding of the world which is multifaceted, but of which they are not conscious.
2. They should also understand that no culture is an absolute entity by or in itself. The version of each culture realizes only a limited range of human experiences of existence. Reading and gaining the competence of searching for cultural ethos in the autobiographies facilitates better intellectual understanding, expands their moral and intellectual horizons, reduces tendency to stereotype and objectify the 'other.' They will learn to decentre themselves from their own cultural point of view and will be able to look at the world through the perspective of the other person. They would avoid becoming judgmental. The way of living of other people will become as neutral to them as is their own. They will try to understand the identities of the people and would be more willing to accept them as they are instead of applying their own value system to them.
3. Perusing autobiographies will lead to better understanding of one's own culture with others. Students will have better knowledge of each other's cultural heritage. Every culture has an internal multiplicity, plurality of traditions and there is a continuous exchange, dialogue, concord or discord taking place within these multiple traditions. Students will understand that no culture is a monolith or has cultural purity. Reading about different lives across different times and spaces will cure them of any sceptical attitudes towards other cultures and their own sense of superiority over others. As discussed in the second point as they will come to know of fluidity, exchange and elastic nature of the cross-cultural exchanges, they will learn to accept this ambiguousness, this lack of clarity. After getting the perspective they would try to look at it in a positive manner instead of treating it as a problem or hindrance.
4. At the same time they will be able to relate the biographies with the socioeconomic and political conditions of that particular time period. This will give them an added understanding of checking the facts against the subjective truth and how these two facets affect each other. They will be able to detect the influence of the socio-economic condition on the individual lives and culture which constitutes the collective but plural way of living of a particular society. They can know that no culture comes into existence out of a vacuum. The economic relations of production, the constraints and machinations of international capital in the global market and the existing power structures within and without the particular social formation are the generative contexts that need to be considered

while dealing with these issues.

5. They will develop the quality of empathy in them. They will start to think through the point of view of the other person too. They can relate to the emotions, opinions of others, which will give them more informed approach towards anything. Students will also learn to be critical about the point of view of the auto biographer. They will learn not to accept anything at the face value. As the autobiography is situated in the real world of the real life subject they will learn to ask questions such as: From whose point of view are the issues discussed? From the perspective of those who are socially powerful, hegemonic or from the perspectives of the 'subalterns', oppressed, marginalized? They will know that multiculturalism does not mean bringing the marginalized to accept the ideologies of the dominant. Their view will be informed with proper questions about the past and the present.
6. As the works included in the course content will not only cover Indian terrain but non-Indian auto biographers too they will have an exposure to various linguistic conventions, non-verbal communication and rules in several culture. Through this awareness they may start to learn or look at their own linguistic conventions and verbal, non-verbal communication patterns which speak louder than the words. It will improve their communication skills and ability to connect to others effectively, resulting in healthy exchange of thoughts and higher level of confidence.
7. The capacity of interpretation can be developed through the introduction of autobiographies in the syllabus. They can relate and compare traditions, rituals, myths, legends, customs and various other factors between different cultures. Such study will lead to the deeper understanding of their own culture and the other cultures too. This will develop their ability to look at the situation or an event or a document at deeper level.
8. They will gain a critical consciousness. As discussed above in one of the points not only they will not ask questions to the works introduced, but they will also look at the current situations, real life situations critically. The so called subjective account of the "bigger picture" will give them the ability to trace the progression of several cultural, social, political institutions over time. The works can give them a perspective to look at the past, present and future. This ability will give them a valuable critical mindset which is useful for their intellectual and moral development.

According to my own experience I observed certain type of unrest in students after the transfer of power in India in 2014. Heated discussions were taking place amongst them about Modi and his 'regime'. Some expressed an opinion that dictatorship is the only way for India in future and some were exponents of anarchy. When I introduced autobiographical account of Ernesto Che Guevara titled as 'Motorcycle Diaries' and when we discussed his whole work in the backdrop of Cuban Revolution as supportive for informed reading of 'Motorcycle Diaries', I began to see some change in their previous uniformed and impulsive attitudes towards the Indian and overall scenario. After completing the reading and discussion of the work I displayed a political poster in the class which was symbolic depicting the process and cycle of any revolution. I asked them to observe and interpret in the class itself. In the given amount of time of thirty minutes almost all of them came with wonderful observations and details. Everybody had succeeded in capturing the gist of the poster and many of them had used the things we discussed in the class in relation to Che Guevara's diary. They displayed better understanding of the institutions and reformations, their view was informed. As discussed earlier they clearly showed signs of intellectual and moral maturity. This experience of mine convinces me that if put into proper perspective with careful thought behind it introducing autobiographical works can greatly help in creating positive relations among people across diverse cultures creating the spirit of interdependency and it will also help in the overall development the students.

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