

## **Cosmopolitanizing Literature Education in Singapore: Rethinking Why and How we Teach Literature**

**Suzanne S. Choo**

National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

[Panel talk titled “Literally speaking: What are the boundaries” organized by The Select Centre, 14 April 2016, 7.30pm – 9pm.]

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### **Introduction**

In late Feb 2013, the Minister of Education released figures about the GCE O level enrollment. We learnt that enrollment has dropped from 48% in 1992 to 22% in 2001 and 9% in 2012 for full literature (there was another 9% who took elective lit).

I'm not going to focus on these figures today. Instead, I want to highlight some of the comments that emerged after the Straits Times published an article about the decline of literature.

While everyone was arguing about the value of lit, quite a number of people said the opposite:

- “Let's not put a value to literature” (ST Forum, 6 March 2013) – “WRITER Oscar Wilde wrote that ‘all art is quite useless.’ What he meant, I presume, is that art's value is intrinsic, that it has no higher purpose than an aesthetic sense of beauty.”
- “Studying subject doesn't make one a better person – but that's fine” (ST Forum, 10 March 2010) – “Taking literature is its own good and it does not need any other justification to exist.”
- “Let's make literature compulsory” (Today, 5 May 2013) – “If literature is needed, it must not be because it can offer us something in return. We need it because of a more primal reason – we simply cannot live without it.”

These arguments are essentially premised on the doctrine of aestheticism. Aestheticism was a movement that emerged in Europe in the late 19th century and emphasizes arts for arts sake or the idea that art is intrinsically valuable and should not have any kind of moral, political use.

In literature education, a version of aestheticism took the form of formalism and new criticism movements that emphasized close reading of texts without paying attention to that which is outside the text – the reader's subjective emotions or the implied author's intentions.

Today, aesthetic criticism is the dominant pedagogical approach to schools and it is evidenced in the national examination where students are asked to critique unseen passages or discuss the literary text in relation to 5 areas of study – plot, character, setting & atmosphere, style and theme.

In my analysis of GCE O level Literature questions from 1990 to 2013, I observe that questions increasingly encourage aesthetic appreciation since the proportion of questions requiring students to analyze the style of the writer has increased from 4.3% in 1990 to 16.2% in 2000 to 91.1% in 2013.

I'm going to suggest 5 reasons why aestheticism and the practice of aesthetic criticism is detrimental to literature education and in fact, I would argue is one of the contributing factors to literature education's decline.

### **Reason 1 – Aestheticism leads to the idolatry of the text**

Literature education becomes immersed in the fictional world of the text. This can result in extreme close reading. This idolizing of the text leads to the perceived irrelevance of the subject.

### **Reason 2 – Aestheticism disregards literature education's social and political role**

We need to distinguish between reading literature and literature education. In the literature classroom, students do not simply read literature. They are taught the skills to critically make arguments and dialogue with others about literature. In other words, literature education has a use value – this is tied to its social and political function.

One example is the Straits Chinese Magazine which was launched in 1897 by Dr Lim Boon Keng and his friend Song Ong Siang shortly after they returned to Singapore from England. They described the magazine as a "periodical literature" and were quite likely to have been influenced by literary periodicals that were flourishing in England and Europe from the late eighteenth century. The philosopher Jurgen Habermas has discussed how such literary periodicals had an important social and political function leading to the development of a critical public sphere where people could come together to discuss political issues, critique the government through literature. This is an early example of how literature performed an educative role in cultivating a critical public.

### **Reason 3 - Aestheticism results in an exclusionary focus on exemplary texts**

Because the emphasis is on appreciation of the inherent beauty in texts, only exemplary texts are included.

In the prescribed list of texts (excluding anthologies) included in the Literature examination from 1990 to 2013, authors who originate from the Ireland, England, and United States account for 65% of the texts in contrast to authors originating from Africa and Singapore who account for 14% and 10% respectively.

The most frequently included author is William Shakespeare, who is also the only one to be included at least once for each year of the examination, followed by Arthur Miller.

The emphasis on aesthetic criticism may be observed in the ethos of our literature curriculum. This can be observed in the first paragraph of the current syllabus which states that "Literature is the critical study of literary texts. Central to the subject is the critical analysis of how language is purposefully and creatively used in texts in order to create meaning and explore issues or themes."

## **Alternatives: Towards a cosmopolitan vision**

Instead of a philosophy of aestheticism, I propose that the literature curriculum needs to be grounded on cosmopolitan ethical criticism. This would mean seeing literature as constructed, part of cultural-philosophical discourse. Its aim would be to “cultivate critical ethical thinkers who can empathize and engage with multiple and marginalized others in the world.”

Cosmopolitanism is not a new term. It emerged in Ancient Greece and denotes “citizen of the world.” To be cosmopolitan minded is to think beyond oneself, beyond the borders of one’s community and nation. It is to think in relation to how to live ethically with others in the world.

### **What are the implications for a cosmopolitan literature education?**

#### **Implication 1: Literature education becomes connected with ethical education**

First, literature education becomes not merely tied to aesthetic criticism but becomes connected to ethical education.

Whenever I mention literature and ethics, people become alarmed and associate this with indoctrination but ethical education is not moral education. Moral education is tied to right conduct and centers on normative principles of right and wrong.

On the other hand, ethical education centers on reasoning, reflection about how to live in relation to others. As the philosopher Jacques Derrida says, “Ethics is hospitality; ethics is so thoroughly coextensive with the experience of hospitality”

Philosophers who have contributed to a cosmopolitan outlook have always prioritized ethics. Immanuel Kant’s argument is to ““Treat humanity, whether in [one’s] own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only” think about what this would mean – if understanding the other were an end goal in literature education?

This aligns with the claims of one of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century’s most significant philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas. He pushes for “ethics as first philosophy” that ethics should be prioritized above instrumental, aesthetic and other aims.

Focusing on language, Levinas states that the essence of language is not merely to communicate meaning but it is friendship and hospitality. Similarly, Jurgen Habermas states that language is a means for reaching understanding.

#### **Implication 2: Aesthetics is a means to ethics as an end**

If we prioritize ethical engagement in literature education does not mean that we ignore the aesthetics of texts. It is to see aesthetics as a means to ethics as an end.

Take a look at the graphic novel by Shaun tan titled *The arrival*. It’s on the first few pages, the aesthetics of the text, the subtle gesture of the husband’s hand on top of his wife on top of a luggage all serve to evoke our empathy about the struggle of the immigrant as he leaves home.

The point is that literary language is incomplete and polysemic in meaning but it is the power of aesthetic language that conveys the ethical force of texts causing us to empathize, to feel.

What does it mean to prioritize ethical engagement in our classes?

We need to continue developing students' literary appreciation skills but expand their understanding of ethical philosophy so that they can learn to critique values in texts. For example, units of study could explore concepts such as Justice – What is justice? What constitutes just or unjust acts? How do texts from different cultures represent justice? Explore utilitarianism, Consequentialism, Kantian, Aristotelian and other notions of justice via texts.

For example in *Hunger Games*, aside from questions about plot, character, style etc., we can ask: What kind of value system is both these texts resisting and how? How is utilitarianism represented in both texts? Which is more effective? Why?

### **Implication 3: Shift from literature in English to world literature**

If we see literature education's key role in cultivating critical ethical thinkers who can empathize and engage with multiple and marginalized others in the world, this would lead to a shift from a literature in English curriculum to a world literature curriculum.

Literature is what mediates between the enclosed familiar world of the classroom and other worlds that our students may not be aware of. This is why they need to read translated texts, this is why they need to read texts from non-Western countries they would not ordinarily travel to.

In the International Baccalaureate Literature paper for example, we see that their assessment requires students to study works in translation. This requirement is absent in the O and A level literature papers. But the IB includes a works in translation component because it fits with their end goal: "To develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect."

### **Implication 4: Emphasis on comparative and interrupted reading**

A cosmopolitan literature curriculum would also emphasize comparative and interrupted readings of texts. In our curriculum upper sec students read 1 prose text and 1 play over two years

But what if we focus on:

1. Breadth rather than depth of reading?
2. Intertextual comparisons of texts rather than singular close reading of text? What if comparisons centered on interrupting the perspective of the singular text?
3. Contextual analysis of texts taking into account the social, political, and historical factors concerning text and author?

**Implication 5: Shift aesthetic appreciation to engagement with contemporary local and global issues**

Finally, a cosmopolitan literature curriculum would shift aesthetic appreciation to engagement with contemporary local and global issues.

Our literature curriculum appears divorced from any connections to realworld issues like terrorism, global disease, immigration etc. Students can read about terrorist attacks in the newspapers and then in the lit class, discuss the character of Boxer in animal Farm.

There is a disconnect between the world of fiction and world of reality. The question is how can literature engage with what Bruce Robbins terms “new, dirty cosmopolitanism” i.e. real instances of global violence and injustice rather than a celebration of multiculturalism?

There’s a lot of newer YA Lit now tied to global issues that we should not be afraid of discussing in the literature class. Books that can invite discussions about modern day terrorism e.g. bottle in the gaza sea about Israel-Palestinian conflict, Sold on human trafficking, freedom anthologies on human rights, anthology of short stories on global themes.