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Teaching Mexican-American Literature in Siberia: Global Perspective on Universal Values in Character Education of Students

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Abstract

Globalizing world forces students to turn from narrow-minded to open-minded thinking that promotes intense interest to other, even distant, cultures. The purpose of the study is to examine universal values in the texts of Mexican-American writers that are under study in Chita, Transbaikal Siberia, use of these values in literary teaching and learning process and their contribution to character education of students living in another, distant region. The study results reveal that works of Mexican-American authors contain basic universal values that bring people together beyond distance and can contribute to character education of students worldwide. A methodology to study includes axiological approach, comparative and historical methods. The authors explore novels *"The Squatter and the Don"* (1885) by María Amparo Ruiz de Burton and *"River of Angels"* (2014) by Alejandro Morales, that are included in MA courses (Graduate Program Director – prof. T. Voronchenko) in Transbaikal State University and considered effective in the process of teaching and learning and character education of students. Arguably, Mexican-American literature is of lively interest for Russian-Siberian students due to the ethnocultural parallelism of US-Mexico and Russia-China-Mongolia border zones. Teaching Mexican-American literature in such a remote region as Transbaikal Siberia provides upbringing of students based on universal values possible beyond distance and beyond stereotypes. The authors conclude that teaching literature of geographically distant regions promotes intense development of students' open-minded thinking since it initiates acquirement of other values and, taking into account difficulties in real travel, the emergence of interest, empathy and understanding the commonness of basic universal values.

Keywords: Mexican-American literature; character education; universal values; moral values.

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1. Introduction

Global trends in education presuppose movement of students' knowledge beyond the bounds of their habitual historical and cultural surroundings, initiates students' turn from narrow-minded to open-minded thinking, motivates students to "project themselves as members of a global community with responsibilities for the social welfare of person beyond their immediate experience" (Nucci, Krettenauer & Narvaez, 2008). Study of literature at higher education institution can provide facilities for students' turn towards global perspective since literary works as the object of teaching and learning are the important source of knowledge about life experience, virtues, values and the other elements of a person's worldview. Modern scholars are unanimous in the opinion that the involvement of the literature to explore moral values over a long historical path gives result (Nucci et al., 2008). In such a way a special role of literary education in character education of students can be acclaimed. Specifying the role of certain academic courses in the process of character education, including literature, Hersh (2015) emphasizes that this process is long, cumulative, and collective: "character and moral issues are pervasive, encountered in conversation and reflection in almost all courses be they in history, literature, philosophy, biology, theater, and art" (Hersh, 2015). The purpose of the study is to examine universal values as they are portrayed in the texts of Mexican-American writers, that are under study at Transbaikal Siberia MA courses (Graduate Program Director – prof. Voronchenko), and their implementation into curriculum and contribution to character education of students.

An issue of character education experiences is a growing interest of educationalists all over the world. Over the recent decades a number of studies have been in progress in USA (Berkowitz, Bier 2007, Nucci 2008, Narvaez 2008, Lickona, 2009) as well as in other countries: Canada (Krettenauer, 2008), Sweden (Bohlin, 2008), Russia (Fokin 2002; Fomina, 2012). We suppose that U.S. developmental psychologist and professor of education Lickona's (1996) conception of character education as a leading term for implementation moral values and ethics in schools) is suitable for the system of higher education. Recent educational studies approve today's tendency to person-oriented education in universities (Collini, 2012) and the idea that higher education institution has a civic responsibility to teach students moral values (Kiss & Euben, 2010). Hersh (2015) delineates the concept of character education and emphasizes that the upbringing process goes from birth affected by family, neighbors, church, and school and continued at the university, where there is a variety of options, and thus it is very important to pay special attention to character education at a higher education institution. Upbringing of a young man's personality has been an urgent issue at all times but recent sociological research, for instance, in Russia and US indicate an alarming trend of moral character decline among the students at higher education institutions. Russian scholars T. Voronchenko and G. Lavrova in line with the ideas of Arkharova (2012), Borisova (2006), Martynova (2002), Nizovskikh (2013) write, "In recent decades, due to a sharp breaking of the socio-political system in Russia (1990s) and the loss of the spiritual traditions among young people, there are widespread consumer ideals and reduction in the level of education and manners" (Voronchenko, Lavrova 2015, p. 653). There is a similar situation in U.S. student community: "this trend stems from many publicized incidents of serious violence" (McElmeel, 2002, p. xiii). Both Russian and U.S. researchers posing the problem of students' moral decay put high hopes on teaching values through curriculum, in other words put forward the notion of character education. The approach of U.S. educational theorists M. Berkowitz and M. Bier to character education principles are broadly congruent with Lickona's but covers wider sphere of a person's development including "professional development; student interactive pedagogical strategies; an explicit focus on character/ethics; direct training of social and emotional competencies; modeling of character; aligned classroom/behavioral management strategies; and community service and/or service learning" (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007). Agreeing with M. Berkowitz's works Bara (2015) writes, "*character education encompasses ethical, moral, emotional, citizenship education, et cetera, that is, everything that is concerned with the positive development of the person*" (Bara, 2015). These principles, especially the core moral values (justice, brotherly love, personal love, wisdom, bestowing virtue, modesty, humility), explicit focus on ethics, training emotional competencies are the main principles of MA program Mexican-American literary course curriculum in Transbaikal State University.

The object of study is literary works of María Amparo Ruiz de Burton "*The Squatter and the Don*" (1885) and Alejandro Morales "*River of Angels*" (2014) containing basic universal values that can contribute to character education of students. More than a century divides the life and creativity of Alejandro Morales (b. 1944) and Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton (1832-1895), two extraordinarily talented writers who have left an indelible mark in the history of Chicana/o and American literature. Beyond differences in time periods, social status (Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton was from the aristocratic environment; Alejandro Morales is from a working family, he is the son of Mexican immigrants), manner of writing and approaches to creativity, there is a lot in common between these writers. Throughout their life they were connected with La Frontera (Borderlands) which was not only the geographical border for them, but also political, economic, physical, cultural and ideological one. Being part of a minority group of Mexican-Americans, Alejandro Morales and Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton faced numerous difficulties and obstacles such as land dispossession, political marginality, cultural oppression, racist discrimination, gender-subordination and they reflect them in their literary works. Breaking boundaries between public and private spheres Alejandro Morales and Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton bring up in their "*River of Angels*" (2014) and "*The Squatter and the Don*" (1885) such essential and important issues as race, ethnicity, gender, class, women's status in a patriarchal culture, searching for overcoming the difficulties and bitter experience by means of orientation towards universal moral values.

Mexican-American literature is of special interest for Russian-Siberian students' due to the ethnocultural parallelism of the U.S.-Mexico and Russia-China-Mongolia border zones (Voronchenko, 2014). Like Mexican-Americans, many of the Transbaikal people are of mixed blood – "gurans", mixture of Russians and Natives (Evenks, Buryat-Mongols). Since that we dare to call gurans figuratively "chicanos of Siberia".

2. Methodology

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of using the texts of Mexican-American writers on the extent to which students develop moral values we selected certain types of in-class and extracurricular activity. Our hypothesis is that reading and guided discussion of given texts that stress the theme of universal moral values will have an effect on students' acquisition of these values.

Being aware of terminological problem and variety of interpretation for the terms "moral values", "values", "ethics" (such great thinkers as Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Spinoza, Locke, Kant, Hegel, Darwin trace this complicated set of concepts) we adhere to Encyclopedia Britannica's "Ethics: The Study of Moral Values" (1962) position: "ethics – the study of what is right and wrong in human conduct" (Cain & Adler, 1962), and what is right is considered good. Thus, as "we cannot help what we feel, but we can help what we do" (Cain & Adler, 1962) we refer moral values to prosocial behavior, personal traits of character, attitudes and motives, associated with *good*.

For the purposes of understanding how the given literary texts work on the students' acquisition of universal moral values we made an axiological analysis of the novels and offer forms of students' classwork and extracurricular activity. Axiological method was used to investigate whether given texts contain the portrayal of moral values and whether they can be considered effective in character education of students. The axiological ground for our research is the ethical theory of prominent German philosopher Nicolai Hartmann (1882-1950), regarded as a key representative of critical realism and as one of the most important twentieth century metaphysicians. He provides a fundamental approach to values as the basic concept of philosophical ethics and assembles a catalogue of values in terms of multilevel structure. There are four groups of moral values: 1) fundamental moral values (the good, the noble, richness of experience, and purity); 2) special moral values discovered by ancients (justice, wisdom, courage, and self-control); 3) special moral values, discovered by Christianity (brotherly or neighborly love, truthfulness, modesty and humility); 4) special moral values, discovered by moderns (love of the remotest, bestowing virtue, personality, personal love) (Hartmann, 2002).

Comparative and historical methods include diachronic and synchronic analysis and are used to examine and correlate different approaches to the term of character education with regard to higher education; to explore the processes of ethno-cultural values' exchange in the US-Mexico

border zone in order to understand Russia-China-Mongolia border cultural situation better. A diachronic analysis concerns with the evolution and change of Mexican-American writers' position regarding issues of moral values over time. A synchronic analysis, in contrast, limits its concern to a particular moment of time and helps us to take moral values as a working system at the moment and refer Transbaikal students' comprehension of universal values as they are viewed by Mexican-American writers.

The study was conducted in Transbaikal State University basing on Mexican-American literary course curriculum of MA program. The object of study is literary works of María Amparo Ruiz de Burton "*The Squatter and the Don*" (1885) and Alejandro Morales "*River of Angels*" (2014). Experimental project consisted of discussing and analyzing the given texts for revealing universal moral values and making an assumption about the effectiveness of these texts for the process of teaching and learning and character education of students.

3. Findings and Results

Guided by the axiological analysis of the María Amparo Ruiz de Burton's "*The Squatter and the Don*" (1885) and Alejandro Morales's "*River of Angels*" (2014), we suggest, that these literary texts would be effective in teaching universal values for students. By means of literature the values can be learnt through appreciation of common cultural heritage, learning about lives of people in different historical periods and empathy towards them. While working with literary text a teacher should place emphasis on moral behavior of characters and portrayal of heroes guided by the universal values. We search to understand how the definition, understanding and acquirement of universal moral values can be implemented in the process of character education while working with the novels of María Amparo Ruiz de Burton "*The Squatter and the Don*" (1885) and Alejandro Morales "*River of Angels*" (2014).

Reading the novels presupposes students' moral awareness, perspective-taking and empathy. The students in the experimental groups would participate in classroom discussions and exercises designed to reinforce the values presented in the books. Activities for students in the experimental groups include writing quotes, making a scheme that expressed the values portrayed in each novel, the characters and their interconnections in the novels. Classwork consists of discussion, project defenses, and colloquiums. Extracurricular activities include writing essays, "writing a letter to the hero", and graduation thesis works on the novels of Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton and Alejandro Morales.

The main technique to reveal values in the literary text is empathy emerged during close reading of the text and evaluation of a moral behavioral of the character. Evaluation (analysis and discussion) of a moral choice of a literary hero enables to form personal moral convictions. The empathy is aimed at developing aspirations to analyze actions of the protagonist among the students, to reflect on the moral side of his or her choice, determine their own choice. The student is told to evaluate and analyze a behavior of literary protagonists: open-minded patriarch, Mexican aristocrat Don Mariano Alamar; squatter's (Mr. Darrell's) son Clarence; Don Alamar's daughter Mercedes ("*The Squatter and the Don*", 1885); a Mexican farmer Abelardo; Abelardo's son Oakley Rivers; Oakley's son Albert; a representative of rival Anglo descent family Louise Keller ("*River of Angels*", 2014). The teacher can ask the following questions: "Do you agree with the hero's choice? Why?", "What choice would you make? Why?". At the same time questions are given individually to each student on a card. It can be well integrated into extra-curricular activities, for instance, literary brain-ring based on literary works, where students are asked questions based on the narratives. To prepare students to personal and true-life self-identification, moral evaluation of literary protagonists' actions must be regularly practiced, since it is the evaluation itself, especially a reflexive evaluation of the hero's action (applying the situation to the self), that forms the system of moral values, under the influence of which the student will choose his or her individual way of life in the future. The mechanism of perspective-taking and empathy towards the literary events can be reflected in the following algorithm:

- Evaluation of the moral behavior of a literary protagonist.
- Defining character's moral and ethic position within a universal system of value indicators.

- Comparison of character's moral position with personal moral position.
- General conclusions about appreciation such a moral behavior.

We believe that *the good* stands above the others values and to some extent encompasses the other groups of moral values, as they are seen by Hartmann, for instance: fundamental, ancient, Christian and modern ones: "good is direction towards values" (Hartmann 2002). Taking into account the numerous similarities in themes of Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton's and Alejandro Morales's creative works (cultural oppression, racist discrimination, gender-subordination), it is significant to explore the authors' orientation towards the Ancient values of justice, wisdom, Christian values of brotherly love, modesty and humility while searching the ways to resolve conflicts and building dialogues. The following types of in-class and extracurricular activities enable to form moral feelings via confronting the feelings of heroes with those of the students:

- Comparing personal feelings with those of the literary hero.

This activity facilitates relevant evaluation of one's feelings, and the feelings of the hero. If in the life of the student, such situations occurred, he or she will compare what feelings were felt by the protagonist, and what feelings has the student experienced in similar circumstances. In order to better understand the feelings of the hero, and compare them with one's own sensibilities, the student will have to understand the hero's action, reflect on what had caused him to act this way, and not another, what feelings did he experience at the time, how would have the student acted in that situation. Comparing feelings can facilitate the formation of empathy, sympathy, compassion, kind-heartedness in student, as well as the ability to put oneself in the place of the literary hero. This activity type can be included into extra-curricular work, especially during the homeroom period. The students can write an essay about their feelings and emotions and read it to the group, if they want.

Students would feel sympathy towards Mexicans and Californios¹, which are portrayed distressed by the stereotypes and the kinds of disregard on the part of Anglo-Americans. For example, one of the main characters of Morales's "River of Angels" Otchoo Rios, the son of the Mexican farmer Abelardo Rios, was forced by Anglo-American colleagues to officially change his name to Oakley Rivers as it spells and pronounces in more convenient way for them. Students should notice the manifestations of injustice in Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton's novel, where Anglo-American squatters² demonstrates blatantly racist attitude to all "foreigners", especially Spaniards and Mexicans, for whom all Californios – are "greasers"³, "the conquered natives", "inferior people" (Ruiz de Burton 1997). Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton breaks these stereotypes and shows Mexican-Americans or Californios as "superior in both intellect and culture, in contrast to the Anglos, who fall far short of their much-heralded moral and social superiority, but economically and politically stronger" (Ruiz de Burton 1997). The author presents Mexicans as heroic people who are undeservingly suffering from the actions of squatters and the American government, because of which they were illegally deprived of their land, suppressed linguistically, economically and politically, but despite all the odds not broken – they orient to the justice as fundamental value as it proposes that all men are equal. Thus, Ruiz de Burton does not aim to criticize all Anglo-Americans, and one of the main characters, Don Mariano Alamar, wealthy Californio suffered from his land grab, confesses, showing devotion to brotherly love and justice despite the conflicts: "The majority of my best friends are Americans. Instead of hate, I feel great attraction toward the American people. <...> I am fond of the Americans. I know that, as a matter of fact, only the very mean and narrow-minded have harsh feelings against my race" (Ruiz de Burton, 1997). The characters of both "Squatter and the Don" (1885) and "River of Angels" (2014) remain grounded in his or her station in life and show elements of humility, modesty and brotherly love by openly

¹ Californio - is a Spanish term for a descendant of a person of Castilian or other Spanish ancestry who was born in what is now the U.S. state of California.

² Squatter – is a person who locates a land claim on land that belongs to some other person

³ «Greaser» – was a derogatory term for a Mexican in the 19th century in the U.S. Southwest. It most likely derived from one of the lowliest occupations typically held by Mexicans, the greasing of the axles of mule carts; they also greased animal hides that were taken to California where Mexicans loaded them onto clipper ships (a greaser). The term was actually incorporated into an early California statute, the Greaser Act (1855), an expression of a virulent form of anti-Mexican sentiment among many Anglo-Americans.

acknowledging their situation and making efforts to overcome it. In this way, Ruiz de Burton and Morales levels out the opposition between Anglo-Americans and Mexicans via mixed marriages and coming-into-being new “mestizos” like little Mariano Mechlin and Josefita Alamar (“Squatter and the Don”, 1885) and Albert Rivers and Luisa Keller (“River of Angels”, 2014) gives an imaginary resolution to a social contradiction in South-West of the USA. In Morales’s “River of Angels” (2014) Mexican-American Albert Rivers before the marriage was forced to rethink his heritage and at first he discovers that his Mexican heritage is an objection to becoming successful, but facing the truly value of personal love he sees a way to overcome prejudice: “I think it’s a good thing to know who you are, to learn about your ancestry. – What if I am Mexican? – Then you are Mexican and you are mine and I love you” (Morales, 2014). Mixed marriages between Mexican-Americans and Anglo-Americans are the key events in these novels so it demonstrates the authors’ appreciation towards such a fundamental moral value as love and its ability to prevent and overcome conflicts.

- Writing a “letter to the hero”.

This activity type is considered to be an effective in forming moral feelings among students as well. We offer to ask the students to write a letter of support or sympathy to the hero who is in trouble or who faces problems, ask to give the hero who is in a difficult situation some advice, or conversely ask to write a letter to an antagonist, to try and explaining to him that he is acting badly and give advice on how to act or behave in a given situation. Writing a letter can help students better understand their own feelings and their attitude to the literary hero. In the process of writing the letter, students can will try to better understand the emotional state of the heroes, putting themselves in their shoes, learning to analyze actions and various real-life situations, look for possible other ways to deal with difficult situations, perhaps remember events, similar to those that the hero is experiencing, that occurred in their own lives.

For example, students would be asked to write the letter to the main character of Ruiz de Burton’s “*The Squatter and the Don*” (1885) Don Mariano Alamar. Students would argue about his inherent dignity and true nobility and would be interested in finding out how he is trying to adapt to the new way of life, looking for inter-cultural dialogue in the new socio-cultural environment. They should wonder how he being a Spanish speaker could learn English very well, how he demonstrates his high professional qualities by offering various ways to settle the arguments between him and the squatters. But Don Alamar’s position towards his own family and community could be characterized by the students as indifference, apathy and prejudicial attitude due to his unsatisfying conclusion about the survival of his people: “*I am afraid there is no help for us native Californians. We must sadly fade and pass away. The weak and the helpless are always trampled in the throng. We must sink, go under, never to rise*” (Ruiz de Burton 1997). Abelardo Rios (“*River of Angels*”, 2014) is in the similar situation. He is a Mexican farmer who owned a large portion of land bordering the river, but in the beginning of the 20th century he faces the crashing of old habits and decides to build a peaceful dialogue with Anglo-Americans, advocating for the love and respect of nature furthermore. Both Don Alamar and Abelardo Rios’ images are associated with wisdom and nobility as well.

- Students’ written analysis of extracts with moral substance.

The students would be asked to analyze the extracts from the novels written by Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton and Alejandro Morales. After such an activity, the students are to answer from one to three questions. This activity type is aimed at indirect identification of moral convictions among the students via their interpretation of heroes’ actions.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The authors conclude that study of literature of geographically distant countries promotes intense development of students’ open-minded thinking since it initiates acquirement of other values and, taking into account difficulties in real travel, the emergence of interest, empathy and understanding the unity of basic universal values. Effectiveness of forming moral values in students in the educational process is provided by certain types of in-class and extracurricular activity oriented to opening up and development of spiritual and moral values in them. The students’ work with the novels “*The Squatter and the Don*” (1885) by Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton and “*River of*

Angels” (2014) by Alejandro Morales is aimed at definition, evaluation and formation of moral concepts, reflections and beliefs that ultimately define further students’ behaviour. Taking into account a specific role of literature in character education of students and the results of proposed activity of MA students within the Mexican American course of MA program at Transbaikal State University the authors conclude that:

- Character education of students through teaching of universal values is considered the main educational responsibility that can contribute to prosocial and ethical behavior of students all over the world.
- Building desirable traits of character and moral values would help students develop as responsible citizens of global community.
- Literature as guide to self-understanding and understanding different people and cultures gives an example of overcoming the evil and direction to good, if globally speaking, as the basic fundamental and universal value.
- Teachers should encourage students to develop moral values.
- Teaching literature of such a distant region makes teachers and students understand that good is the unifying principle, that there is a profound commonness of all people in the world, and this commonness is based on the orientation to good (encompassing justice, brotherly love, personal love, wisdom, bestowing virtue, modesty, humility, and nobility) as the universal values.

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