

Indian Novels Teach Complex Identities to Secondary Students

Candice Deal, Corinne Ehrfurth, and Paula Schevers

Multicultural literature offers students diverse perspectives. Due to the ever-increasing and expanding global environment, we believe in emphasizing multicultural literature in the classroom. Presentation and analysis of three contemporary Indian novels offer rigor and relevance to students as they develop an understanding of diverse cultures, which creates a Bahktinian¹ appreciation for the self. With careful guidance, students connect their own situations to those that characters encounter within Manil Suri's *The Death of Vishnu*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, and Jumpha Lahiri's *The Namesake*. These novels all examine issues of identity: Roy explores a fractured identity, Suri exemplifies religious identity, and Lahiri depicts conflict between ethnic and personal identity. This article highlights tangible reasons for introducing Indian culture and discusses the pedagogical applications of literature circles, intertextual analysis and close-reading practices while exploring these texts.

A few days before writing this article, one of us spoke with a colleague about teaching Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* to high school students. After this colleague shared his knee-jerk reaction against introducing such complex material to kids, he respectfully explained that a deeply controversial novel would never be approved to teach in a high school setting. We heard similar concerns at the 2010 MCTE conference, where the three of us presented methods of incorporating contemporary Indian novels into multicultural curricula. Not surprisingly, our audience's reservations were directed particularly toward the teaching of Roy's *The God of Small Things*. However, our convictions remain: challenging texts need inclusion within secondary classrooms and academic risks are worth taking if we are committed to preparing our students for diversity. If students can persevere through Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and obtain information about Puritans' culture and codes, then these same students will apply higher-order thinking skills and connections to discuss the important global topics within contemporary Indian novels. Roy's, Suri's and Lahiri's intricate writing styles and content produce relevant literacy challenges for students.

We need to continue conversations with our colleagues about the most effective means for teaching difficult material. Rather than eliminating culturally and politically relevant texts, we want to encourage accepting David Mura's suggestion in *Braided Lives*: students "must learn the specific histories behind what [they] read" (222). As educators and members of a global society we must make an effort—no matter how laborious—to cross into "unaccustomed" areas of education by searching out methods for incorporating contemporary Indian literature into secondary classrooms.

Literature Circles to Mend Fractured Identities

In a speech given in September 2002, Arundhati Roy explains that "there can never be a single story . . . there are only ways of seeing" ("Come September"). Roy's Booker Prize-winning novel, *The God of Small Things* (2007), attempts to provide a new way of seeing contemporary and traditional India. Although the novel has been highly criticized due to controversial issues—such as caste violence, molestation, incest, and explicit sexuality—it is first and foremost a story about fragmentation and transformation. Roy shows how identities are constructed, fragmented, and redeveloped. By extending to students the invitation to discuss the political and social transgressions in the novel, they can continue to enhance their critical

thinking and analysis skills. By learning about the historical and social themes within the novel, students become more literate in multicultural issues (colonialism, postcolonialism, caste, religion, gender, etc.), which, according to Behbood Mohammadzadeh in “Incorporating Multicultural Literature in English Language Teaching Curriculum,” allows them to “connect conflicts and cultural issues which took place between the discourses within a text to the similar conflicts in other pertinent fiction, newspapers, historical texts, and other nonfictional literary texts” (24). Moreover, students are asked to place themselves in the twin protagonists’ situations, learning how identity formation is sometimes challenged and fractured by society. They can practice reader-response theory by asking and answering questions: How do I identify with some of the issues? How is a certain character’s identity unfolding? How are men and women portrayed throughout the novel? By assessing the ways in which students analyze and connect with *The God of Small Things*, teachers can determine the best methods for teaching literature (examples of which include Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*) required by the 2010 Minnesota Education Standards for English Language Arts.

While Roy’s work is highly engaging and relevant to the political and social framework of identity, a secondary instructor takes a risk when approaching its adult themes. Characters encounter identity-changing events: Velutha, the untouchable Paravan, is brutally murdered; Estha, one of the twins, is molested by the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man; and Ammu, the twins’ mother, and Velutha engage in explicit sexual activity. Although these scenes represent the severe fracturing of characters in the novel, which can lead to an engaging discussion about fractured identities, they are certainly difficult to address in the secondary classroom.

The literature circle structure provides options for students who may feel uncomfortable approaching controversial topics within Roy’s novel. Generally, with a unit that employs literature circles, teachers introduce a couple different novels to students, who decide which book is the most suitable to their interests and comfort level. Students meet in small groups to analyze their chosen literature in depth. Typically, conversation is based off student responses to what they have read, but teachers can provide discussion questions and reading suggestions. Offering novel options to students affords the instructor both an opportunity to address identity and communicate cultural mores. We suggest offering students the choice of *The God of Small Things* by Roy, *Cracking India* by Bapsi Sidhwa, *Nectar in a Sieve* by Kamala Markandaya and *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* by Kiran Desai to engage students to explore their own literary interests, develop critical reading skills and create new ways of seeing the world.

Introducing literature circles into multicultural curricula yields many benefits. According to Harvey Daniels, in his book *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups*, literature circles have been deemed by national literacy standards as one of the “best classroom practices” because they encourage students to “explore a wide range of books representing different cultures, periods, and regions” (7). Literature circles allow for student assessment and correlate with the learning outcomes for AP Composition and Literature. As outlined in the 2010 Minnesota Academic Standards for English Language Arts K-12, in order for 11th and 12th grade students to be college and career ready they must “grapple with works of exceptional craft and thought whose range extends across genres, cultures, and centuries.” In view of those standards, using a literature circle structure to teach multicultural literature also allows students to:

-Understand how personal responses to literature are developed

- Identify and analyze structure of novels and language used
- Analyze ways in which national and personal identity are formed
- Articulate the role of political identity specific to a culture
- Practice strategies for completing sections of the AP exam

While we propose the above objectives, application of literature circles into a classroom varies since each teacher must implement a structure that best fits his or her own teaching style. We suggest that student success can be assessed by adopting the following literature circle structure, which is an adaptation of three different literature circle options as outlined in *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups*:

1. *Teacher will start multicultural unit by introducing the historical aspects put forth in the novels.* For example, with the Roy novel, historical aspects should include at least a timeline of Indian history, synopsis of caste, religion, gender and identity issues.
2. *Teacher will introduce novels.* Continue a discussion of historical relevancy.
3. *Literature circle groups will form according to reading preference.* Students can exchange contact information and divide the novel into sections (according to the number of discussion days available in the unit). Teacher will assign discussion leaders for each section.
4. *Teacher will provide guidelines for each group.* Teacher will hand out unit assignment sheet and discussion evaluation form, which students will use to keep track of their peers' discussion. Teacher will also discuss format for the required journal entries and provide direction for group discussion.
5. *Literature will be read and discussed in groups.* Students will have a set amount of discussion periods where the teacher will provide discussion prompts and questions to consider. Some questions on the Roy novel could include:
 - A. In the beginning of the novel, the narrator explains that "Esthappen and Rahel thought of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually, as We or Us...they were physically separate, but with joint identities" (4-5). Where do we see their identities joined and disjointed throughout the novel? What do you make of the end of the novel?
 - B. Estha and Rahel clearly go through very traumatic experiences. What are some the traumatic experiences? How does each character respond to each experience? How are their identities "smashed" and "reconstituted?"
 - C. Throughout the novel, Rahel has horrific thoughts and terrifying visions (8, 30, 70, 76, 89, and 214). What can you make of her ideas? Does it fracture or help her understanding of the world?
6. *Assessment of learning.* Students will have recorded and evaluated group discussions. Students will create a portfolio including all journal entries, a 4-6 page formal and thematic analysis of their chosen novel, and a short essay reflecting on the individual growth acquired during the unit. (159-74)

The literature circle option allows students to become empowered readers, thinkers, and communicators. This process of reading, analyzing, and discussing is an invaluable tool for students to learn; Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs encourage

challenging students' achievement. Rigorous college-prep programs—including public schools in Minnesota²—have adopted *The God of Small Things* into their curriculum alongside Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Gabriel García Márquez's *100 Years of Solitude*, and other multicultural and American texts. Additionally, more than 500 American schools have adopted an International Baccalaureate program that requires high school students to read, analyze, and discuss multicultural novels throughout their junior and senior years ("UA International"). For both AP and IB classrooms, the literature circle option encourages students and teachers to create a student-centered level of discourse. Through literature circles, teaching becomes focused on a student learning paradigm, encouraging students to invest in their own learning interests. In doing so, students become responsible and equal participants of their education. Because students can use their own discretion when choosing a novel, the level of emotional investment will, hopefully, increase along with the intellectual development of analyzing issues. Moreover, the literature circle promotes communication between students, providing opportunities to learn through multiple and diverse perspectives. In using Roy's work, as well as other demanding novels, students not only learn about ways in which identity is often fractured by specific social and political incidents, but they negotiate literary connections through various personal and shared experiences.

Although Roy's novel introduces topics of controversy into the classroom, teachers have the opportunity to teach beyond the literature. This, according to Chrissy Cooper in *What to Expect When You're Expected to Teach*, is a "teachable moment": a platform for a safe and intellectual exchange of ideas. By incorporating Roy's work into an AP Literature and Composition curriculum and IB programs, students have the chance to explore topics of diversity on their own terms (with modeling, structure and feedback from the teacher). Literature circles allow students and teachers to engage with the transformation of knowledge and ideas in a non-threatening environment. It is in this type of environment that literature will flourish and fractured identities will begin to mend.

Pairing Texts to Illuminate Religious Identity

Another worthwhile academic risk in the secondary classroom occurs when teachers provide students an environment where they can build connections between contemporary fiction and religious texts. Teaching at the intersection of such works focuses on three main objectives: understanding religious tenets via intertextuality, illuminating the core of faith structures within novels, and adopting a balanced appreciation of the world's major religions. In Rochester, Minnesota's third largest city, an upperclassman honors elective titled "Humanities Search" offers students the opportunity to discover identities within ancient to modern faith structures. While students read about a dozen religions during a semester, this section of our article maintains its focus on one of the oldest, still vibrant faiths: Hinduism (or more properly denoted as Santana Dharma).

In each unit of study, the "Humanities Search" teacher presents religions to students through diverse methods. In addition to the typical honors classroom mix of lecturing, reading, discussing, collaborative learning, and writing, every student signs up to act as the "resident expert" on one religion. Each student accepts the responsibility of conducting extensive research on major tenets (including hero stories; passages from central texts; make up of believers; role of god(s), music, architecture; treatment of women; and purpose behind holidays and rites³), delivering a period-long presentation to the class and composing a synthesis essay on how practitioners search for meaning. About halfway through the Hinduism unit, students take a field

trip to Rochester's Samaj Temple, where they witness rites performed by a Hindu priest and spend about an hour interacting with an elder of the community. The teacher pairs a religious text, the Bhagavad Gita, with a fictional novel, Manil Suri's *The Death of Vishnu*. After watching a children's cartoon interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita, students are divided into seven sections, where they read and analyze one specific part of the dialogue in-depth.

The Bhagavad Gita occurs within a foundational epic of India and divulges vital philosophies of the Hindu tradition. Featuring one of Hinduism's main gods, Krishna, as imparting counsel to a human protagonist, Arjuna, the entire text emphasizes the importance of seeking a spiritual guide when facing a moral dilemma. Arjuna struggles with his duty and cannot overcome his doubt alone. To explain the timeless significance of this predicament, Sanskrit scholar Phulgenda Sinha expounds an analogy:

Sometimes a man is faced with a situation in which it is very difficult to decide what to do. If he acts one way, it will be bad; if he acts another way, it will be worse. What should he do in that condition? This condition of indecisiveness might be very tortuous, painful, and disturbing. The remedy for sorrow resulting from such a situation was not provided by Kapila or Patanjali [ancient Hindu philosophers]. Thus, Vyasa felt that unless an answer to this type of sorrow were provided, man would still not be free from sorrow and would not enjoy a healthy and happy life. (77)

Arjuna's circumstance in the Gita extends to students facing moral decisions and those who are trying to determine their identity.

Manil Suri's *The Death of Vishnu* transplants the context and wisdom of the Bhagavad Gita into a modern setting, an apartment complex in Bombay, India. Suri continually reminds readers that the present nature of the contemporary world necessitates a revisiting of ancient texts for guidance. Foreboding passages, such as when one character, Mr. Pathak, realizes that "even when he thought he had found it [peace], like this morning, there was always something that caused it to be short-lived" (Suri 33), ground the recurrence of doubt that characters and readers carry. Although Arjuna found inner peace after understanding his *dharma* (duty) and acting in accordance with it, and although Suri leads his characters through that struggle as well, peace is not achieved on any level at the conclusion of Suri's novel. This open-ended conclusion engages students to dissect their own interpretations of characters and applications of religious tenets.

When scaffolding discussions, a teacher models, invites and challenges students to examine text-based interpretations of characters and to practice applying religious tenets to the characters' lives. For instance, a few chapters into the novel, students spend one class period "in the mind of" a particular family or character. The prompt to start this activity assigns the character(s) and offers direction to each group of students:

*For the rest of the hour, the women in your group need to think like Mrs. Jalal and the guys in your group must get into the mind of Mr. Jalal. Work through the below questions first, then start talking through the motivations behind **your** actions.*

1. *Determine how your character literally/symbolically fits as a representation of one (or more) of the "purposes of life" (ex: Artha).*
2. *What path to liberation would work best for your character? Why?*

3. Trace interaction with specific gods (ex: Lakshmi) or pujas (rituals) that your character has or fails to have.
4. Select at least one quote to best describe your character thus far in the novel.

The next time class meets, students are jigsawed into groups where each character from the novel is represented. This follow-up discussion keeps the students thinking like their character would. They discuss predictions of what they may do next and share self-evaluations of how closely they have been upholding their religion. Students often end up speaking for their particular character throughout subsequent discussions; such an action is an unintended benefit of this activity.

Throughout the Hinduism unit when students cite certain flashbacks contained within the novel, they provide deeper understandings for why the characters act the way they do. Four families reside in a typical, inner-city building: the Hindu Asranis and Pathaks share a kitchen between their flats on the first floor, the Muslim Jalals inhabit the second floor, and the widower Vinod Tanega lives as a hermit on the third floor. A deathly ill Vishnu—a mischievous drunk during the flashbacks—earned the right to squat on the stairway landing between the first level and the street. Although neither of the Hindu wives are happy about this arrangement, “[s]ince nobody actually owned the landing, it was clear that all inhabitation rights to it now belonged to Vishnu; it would have been ridiculous to usurp this order” (Suri 17). During discussions, past students have proposed that Vishnu ought to maintain the order of the entire complex if he functions a symbol of the god Vishnu. Trained to ground their arguments with evidence from the religious and contemporary texts, students use both to debate Vishnu’s ability to uphold worldly defined and expected duties.

Considering students have been pre-taught the Bhagavad Gita’s emphasis on the equality between beings and the highest end existing as a faith-filled experience of the Atman (the spirit that all living beings share) within others, every semester numerous students are not surprised that the thieving, prostitute-loving, seemingly lazy Vishnu serves as the conduit for spiritual growth. Krishna repeatedly addresses the importance of knowing god and seeing him in all things of this world, which is the great mystery that transpires behind knowledge. Therefore Krishna states, “I am impartial to all creatures, / and no one is hateful or dear to me; / but men devoted to me are in me, / and I am within them” (trans. Stoler 9.29). Depending on the issues that students raise, the paradox of the caste system may be divulged here: if people follow Krishna, all beings ought to be treated fairly, so one then cannot justify the treatment of Untouchables. Past students have grappled with this problem. Some have arrived at the thought that Suri tries to represent impartiality by describing Mr. Jalal’s reverence for Vishnu, whom Jalal feels has entered a sacred state.

Students also uncover the contradiction between actions and motivation by studying the characters created by Suri, for neither Jalal nor his Hindu neighbors reveal complete respect for the doctrines of the Gita. To aggravate the situation, Jalal also has not gained the trust of his Hindu neighbors before assuming his self-determined *dharma* as prophet; his character remains consistently earnest and self-assured during the climatic mob scene: “I am convinced, absolutely convinced, that there is only one course of action that can save us all—to follow the directive that Vishnu has asked me to convey to you” (Suri 244). Hindu scholar Phulgenda Sinha asserts what Jalal has neglected to realize: “the growth of a civilization is rooted in what it has learned from its past. The past becomes educational and inspirational only when it commands the trust and respect of the generations that follow. Without trust, even the most treasured ideas and

teachings get rejected” (147). Although he means well, Jalal shares the Gita’s revered vision in a counter-intuitive manner, which incites the distrust of others.

Scenes such as these are popular instances where students take the opportunity to self-analyze and incorporate lessons from the novel and from religion to expand on their own identities as members of a faith or community. Individual response papers⁴ serve as one outlet for personal connections. A previous student related to Jalal’s struggle: “In my life I want to be the person that doesn’t fit the mold. I don’t want to be someone that is predictable and expected. I want to have unique quirks and qualities, and I want to be able to fit in any group/situation.” Her conjunction choice of “and” instead of “but” hints that this student internalized discussions of paradoxes in faith and views searching outside of one’s condoned faith as admirable.

Reading Indian novels helps expand students’ understanding of the actual tenets behind Hinduism and initiates increasing open-mindedness toward other religions that have caught negative attention in the media or in politics. In many parts of the world, religious identity links inextricably with personal identity. Therefore, educating students on various religious tenets not only encourages them to think of their own experiences with spirituality, but it enhances their cultural/global awareness and sensitivity.

Transitioning Readers into Cultural and Personal Identity

Offering engaging texts that also challenge students’ academic abilities needs to occur at the middle school level. Current research about middle school students shows a need and interest for readers to not only comprehend what they are reading but to be able to connect to it on global and personal levels as well. However, teachers face a persistent difficulty in selecting texts that expand our students’ learning horizons and offer broader cultural perspectives. The limited inclusion of Indian novels and other multicultural texts reflects teachers’ hesitancy in the ritual of text adoption. Selection of literature has been and continues to be an ongoing topic of many studies and scholarly articles relating to reading practices and middle school students. Teachers’ perceptions of middle school students in the English and Language Arts classroom continue to be impacted by a view of their students as readers “in transition” (Ivey & Broaddus 68). This idea of transition is represented in not only the physical move from elementary to middle schools but additionally in students’ shifting literary interests. Students in middle school are often viewed as “in transition,” which themes of personal and cultural identity found throughout novels and stories within the genre of multicultural literature reflect. Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel, *The Namesake*, particularly speaks to readers in transition.

Approaches to teaching multicultural literature in order to create a global classroom are not pedagogically ground-breaking; however, many teachers continue to overlook these texts for our “transitional” middle school students. Through the context and teaching of identity, we have the potential to help our students find a place where they fit into complex novels. Donna Alvermann summarizes the importance of identity in relation to literature as being “ways of seeing, acting, believing, thinking and speaking that make it possible for us to recognize (and be recognized by) others like ourselves” (679). For middle school students, eighth grade in particular is a time of transition, not only academically but also in students’ personal lives and experiences. Selecting novels carefully empowers the teacher’s ability of engaging students. Multicultural literature enables students to take ownership of their reading and allows them to “deal with texts in complex ways” (Ivey & Broaddus 71), which fosters heightened textual engagement. The themes of cultural and personal identity in multicultural literature mirror students’ own situations that connect them to a greater worldview and “open doors” through

“ideas and insights of other adolescent [characters]” (Landt 691).

Spaces of transitional identity and recognition of self are frequently portrayed and illustrated by Gogol, who struggles to situate himself between two worlds and two identities: the American culture and society, which he understands and accepts as Nikhil, and his Indian heritage, which knows him as his good name Gogol. Gogol’s exchange with a teacher illustrates the double names (both Gogol and Nikhil) that Gogol identifies with:

. . . when they are alone, Mrs. Lapidus asks,
“Are you happy to be entering elementary school, Gogol?”
“My parents want me to have another name in school.”
“And what about you Gogol? Do you want to be called by another name?”
Gogol picks up a pencil, grips it tightly, and forms the letters of the only word he has learned, thus far to write from memory. (Lahiri 59)

This passage also presents an opportunity for students to relate Gogol’s formation of his identity to their own lives and provides students an introduction to self-exploration of the formation of personal identity. Having students conduct research into the meanings and origins behind their own names creates a foundation for activities about naming, identity, and personal reflections. Additionally, Lahiri’s novel provides a variety of activities through which students can explore and connect with multicultural literature through the contextual lens of personal identity. A few suggested activities include free-association about an elementary school experience when students felt uncomfortable with their own name, heritage or other aspect of identity or family; students could conduct an interview with a family member about the story of their name and the specific reason they were given it; and students could be assigned to small groups to discuss, compare and contrast issues of identity presented other passages or stories, such as Adeline Yen Mah’s *Chinese Cinderella: The Story of an Unwanted Daughter* and Suzanne Staple’s *Under the Persimmon Tree*, where the main characters also confront uncomfortable experiences involving their names.

These themes of transition and personal and cultural identity are simply presented and exemplified by Lahiri. Lahiri’s depictions of cultural situations and familial expectations are represented in the Ganguli family’s experience from India as they immigrate to America. The Ganguli family is frequently depicted as one constantly transitioning and transforming themselves, navigating between both Bengali and American traditions; however, the role of personal identity is ultimately left to the character of Gogol. He represents how personal relationships, family, and friendships often initially define children and young adults. Gogol’s striving to define himself through his own personal experiences reaches out to the typical middle school student, who is testing out his or her individuality. Throughout the novel, Gogol assumes various identities based on the recognition he receives from those around him. Students can most readily identify with Gogol’s experiences:

At seven-thirty the bell rings, and the front door is left open as people and cold air stream into the house. Guests are speaking in Bengali, hollering arguing, talking on top of one another . . . in so many ways, his family’s life feels like a string of accidents, unforeseen, unintended, one incident begetting another...And yet these events formed Gogol, shaped him, determined how he is. (Lahiri 285-287)

In his attempts at understanding his culture and heritage, these same connections mirror his own formation of personal identity. Gogol literally opens doors that serve to bridge his Indian heritage with his American identity. Students can relate to his experiences as a young boy and his transition into adulthood by analyzing how his identity is formed by those around him and his cultural traditions, in conjunction with how he views himself and, in turn, is viewed by others. *The Namesake* challenges students' perspectives of identity and literature by engaging them to draw parallels in their own process of forming a new sense of self, one that is separate from their parents, friends and social perceptions.

The world that Lahiri offers to students also creates a larger global perspective that extends beyond the four walls of the classroom and students' immediate community. Susan Landt further echoes this global viewpoint in her article, "Multicultural Literature and Young Adolescents," where she posits that students who read about diverse cultures "discover similarities in their own" and "look beyond the differences and take a step toward appreciating cultural connectedness" (682). In an increasingly diverse world, students at a younger age need to be able to make connections between literature and their daily lives. The earlier students practice identifying with individuals in literature and develop a better understanding of cultural awareness and strengthen their ability to identify with those of different backgrounds. The teaching of personal identity within multicultural literature—specifically illustrated within Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*—helps transition middle school students into not only more diverse readers but more cognizant global participants.

Bringing Indian Literature to the Teaching Front

In Jhumpa Lahiri's most recent collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*, she begins with an epigraph from Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Custom House":

Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike roots into unaccustomed earth. (qtd. in Lahiri)

In addition to providing a thematic level of understanding in Hawthorne and Lahiri's works, her epigraph underscores the importance of evaluating the instructional texts we use. As authors of this article, we believe that incorporating Indian literature into multicultural curricula allows students and teachers to collaboratively "strike roots into unaccustomed earth." The increasing emergence and popularity of Indian literature inspires students and teachers to seek refuge in other cultures and customs, to move across oceans and into human hearts.

While a wealth of Indian novels would enrich any secondary curriculum, the three we elected to highlight speak directly—yet diversely—to the concepts of identity. The mature situations encountered in Roy's *The God of Small Things* challenge readers to reason through global issues that socially impact cultures and individuals. Students are encouraged to think about the traumatic events in the novel as metaphors for larger global and cultural issues. By understanding the ways in which characters become fractured, students can apply their knowledge to other literatures and to their own lives. Suri's *The Death of Vishnu* engages a sensitive reading of religious identity. Focusing specifically on the relationship between Hindus and Muslims within the novel, teachers can lead students toward investigating the historical and religious identities of other cultures in order to forge a bond between religions. Lahiri's work,

more than Suri and Roy, encourages readers to personally identify with fundamental human experiences. Although *The Namesake* details an immigrant experience, it introduces the understanding of one's own identity. Students can absorb the author's pathos through her use of simplistic, honest, and pure writing. We deeply care about the future of our students, and teaching literature from diverse birthplaces adds richness to the soil that we tend in our classrooms.

Notes

1. The theory behind our beliefs stems partly from readings found in Bakhtin's *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, which outlines three states of "being" that characterize the "uniqueness" of an individual through both passive and active thoughts and actions.

2. For an example of a course "offered to high school seniors in the top 30% of their class" that uses Roy's novel, please view Peifer's syllabus:
http://central2.spps.org/uploads/CIS_syllabus.pdf.

3. More detailed information on the presentation and other aspects of the course may be perused via Mayo High School's website:
<http://www.rochester.k12.mn.us/se3bin/clientgenie.cgi?G5button=5093>.

4. The assignment directions for individual response papers: Compose a reflection for each major novel read (*The Death of Vishnu*, *Siddhartha*, *Tao of Pooh*, *The Journey of Ibn Fattoum*, and Jewish/Christian choice novel). Each paper is **due** a week after assigned date for conclusion of novel (ex: *Siddhartha* paper due Thurs. Nov. 4th) Select 3-5 quotes that "speak" to you on some level. Compose a concise (less than 2 page) response that incorporates those quotes into a culminating statement on how this novel shapes your understanding of a specific belief system, religion in general (defined as broadly as is suitable for communication your current understanding), or your personal journey. Let your thoughts take you where they wish; do not self-censor any insights or questions!

Works Cited

Alvermann, Donna E. "Reading Adolescents' Reading Identities: Looking Back to See Ahead." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 44.8 (May 2001): 676-690. Print.

Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhailovich. *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. Ed. Vadim Liapunov and Michael Holoquist. Trans. Vadim Liapunov. Austin: U of Texas P, 1993. Print.

The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War. Trans. Barbara Stoler Miller. New York: Bantam, 1986. Print.

Cooper, Chrissy. "Teachable Moments." *What to Expect When You're Expected to*

- Teach.* Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2002. Print.
- Daniels, Harvey. *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups.* Ontario: Stenhouse Publishers, 2002. Print.
- Ivey, Gary & Karen Broaddus. "Tailoring the Fit: Reading Instruction and Middle School Readers." *International Reading Association* 54. 1 (Sep. 2000): 68-87. Print.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Namesake.* New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004. Print.
- . *Unaccustomed Earth.* Canada: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008. Print.
- Landt, Susan M. "Multicultural Literature and Young Adolescents: A Kaleidoscope of Opportunity." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 49.8 (May 2006): 690-697. Print.
- Mohammedzedah, Behbood. "Incorporating Multicultural Literature in English Language Teaching Curriculum." *Procedia* (2009): 23-27. Print.
- Mura, David. "Living in the Global Village." *Braided Lives.* St. Paul: Minnesota Humanities Commission, 1991. Print.
- Peifer, Lindsay M. "Introduction to Literature- English Lit 1001." *University of Minnesota.* n.d. Web. 27 Dec. 2010.
- Roy, Arundhati. "Come September." Lensic Performing Arts Center, Santa Fe, NM. 18 September 2002. Keynote Speech.
- . *The God of Small Things.* United Kingdom: Harper Perennial, 1998. Print.
- Sinha, Phulgenda. *The Gita as It Was.* La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1986. Print.
- Suri, Manil. *The Death of Vishnu.* New York: HarperCollins, 2001. Print.
- "2010 Minnesota Academic Standards-English Language Arts K-12." *Minnesota Department of Education.* MDE. 9 Nov. 2010. Web. 01 Dec. 2010.
- "UA International Baccalaureate Programme." *UA Schools.* Upper Arlington City School District. n.d. Web. 12 Dec. 2010.