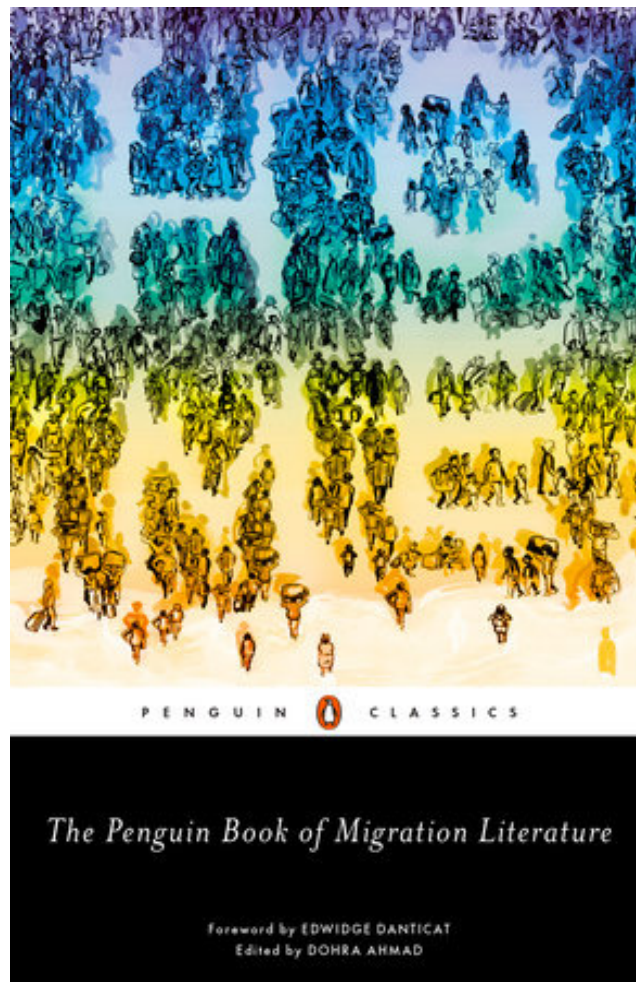


# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## *Teaching Note* Teaching The Penguin Book of Migration Literature

by Tuli Chatterji



THE PENGUIN BOOK OF MIGRATION LITERATURE (2020) PENGUIN CLASSICS

**A**t a time when words such as borders, walls, xenophobia, and immigration have become part of our everyday discourse—nationally and globally—it is difficult to ignore the repercussions of such words and phrases on immigration policies and ultimately our understanding of humanity. Dohra Ahmad's *The Penguin Book of Migration Literature*<sup>1</sup> is the first collection to offer "a global comparative scope" to the diverse and complex journeys of migrants across time and space, offering the reader a literary kaleidoscope of pangs and longing around a place called home. Radically inclusive in its approach, Ahmad's choice of texts critiques "existing discourses and stereotypes" to offer a more nuanced understanding of migration. References to slavery, often erased from migration literature, provide fresh perspectives to displacement narratives through the lens of shared experiences of the "descendants of enslaved and indentured people as well as refugees." At a time when anti-immigrant policies and attitudes violently target immigrants in different parts of the world, Ahmad's collection bears witness to the complex humanity of the journeys.

Diverse and multigenerational in its ensemble of poems, novels, short stories, memoirs, and graphic novels, *Migration Literature's* innovative four-point structure—Arrivals, Departures, Generations, and Return—expands the purview established by previous anthologies of immigrant literature. These categories create such capacious and unexpected possibilities for literary connection that it becomes almost impossible to create a singular "migrant" narrative. Here in Ahmad's world, Japan, Jamaica, the United States, and Egypt -- as seen through texts such as Julie Otsuka's "Come, Japanese," Claude McKay's "The Tropics in New York," Joseph Bruchac's "Ellis Island," and Pauline Kaldas's "A Conversation" -- share the same literary space, making the migrant experience all the more inclusive and performative.

Curious to identify how my students would respond to Ahmad's collection, I decided to teach the text in my Spring 2020 ENG 103 course titled "The Research Paper." In this course, students learn how to choose an academic research topic, pose research questions, and acquire the skills to explore a theme from diverse perspectives. *Migration Literature* became an apt forum to inspire research into migration, a topic both personal and political to many of my students. I soon realized that like Ahmad's stories, each of my students had a tale to tell. Coincidentally, at a time when the pandemic compelled introspection about various forms of socio-economic borders, narratives of migration gained a deeper significance in the hands of the students, thereby encouraging them to explore their own positionality in the context of migration.

By introducing Ahmad's *Migration Literature* to my students at LaGuardia Community College in Queens, I wanted to express gratitude to Dr. Ahmad who, as my dissertation advisor at St. John's University, played an integral role in shaping my own understanding of migrations, crossings, colonial histories, and postcolonial narratives. Reading the stories with my students brought back memories of how as a recent immigrant myself, I found it challenging to navigate the different cultural and linguistic

spaces—experiences that many of my immigrant students shared during the discussion.

One of the most diverse colleges in the country, LaGuardia Community College of the City University of New York, the largest urban public university in the US, has over 36,000 students who hail from 158 countries and speak 89 languages, making LaGuardia a vibrant space where nations, cultures, languages, and histories continually meet and intersect. With close to 60% of LaGuardia students born in countries other than the United States, narratives of migration are deeply embedded in our hallways and classrooms.

In such an environment, *Migration Literature* mobilizes a conversation in which students' own lived experiences of migratory crossings combine with the anthology's narratives, helping to both analyze texts and critique present national and global political climate. After initial discussion of each reading, students did a free writing of their first-impression of the work that included cataloguing 6-8 words that captured the theme of migration as mentioned in the text. This was followed by a short reflective assignment where students narrated their own crossings from the perspectives of the words catalogued earlier. The third step included a critical close reading of the text by contextualizing it through the lens of personal crossings and how contemporary political discourses on migration<sup>2</sup> reinforce xenophobia, racism, and white supremacy. Ultimately, students generated texts that blended analysis of their own migrations (literal and metaphorical), those of one of the anthology's writers, and some research on the topic that they chose for their final paper.

***What emerged from the narratives in the collection is that students, irrespective of their identities, reflected on their own journeys and engaged in a dialogue with the socio-political events of the time.***

Ahmad's different categories for understanding migration—Departures, Arrivals, Generations, and Return—opens up opportunities for students to reflect, explore, and connect with their own roots and identities. Moved by Francisco Jimenez's portrayal in "Under the Wire," where the author highlights risks often taken by immigrants when crossing borders for a better future for their families, students reflected on the privilege of US citizenship and voiced the need to use that privilege for the benefit of migrants and refugees looking for a chance across borders. They wove insights from the stories to critically reflect on their own migration to not only analyze their journeys but also conduct research on the issues that inspired them.

For instance, after reading Egyptian writer Pauline Kaldas's "A Conversation," a bitter account of how a couple were often rebuffed by natives who could only see foreigners preying on their country, a US-born Chinese student wrote: "This xenophobia is inexcusable, but it did not come from nowhere. The stereotype of an inferior people was not

downloaded into American brains overnight by a terrible alien invader. It was a sore made to fester by countless media projecting a certain image of displaced people until it was the only image to be familiar with. In the words of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, this is the danger of a single story.” Ahmad’s selection encouraged her to read Adichie and identify patterns between Kaldas, Adichie, and contemporary socio-political scenarios.

Further, inspired by Ahmad’s reference to slavery and forced migration as the precursor to contemporary migrations, a student who identifies herself as African-American on account of her family lineage, chose to do her research on the identity crisis that most African-Americans like her experience when they are neither seen as migrants nor as natives. By reflecting on the work of Ira Berlin, Henry Louis Gates, and W.E.B. Du Bois, the student analyzed Algerian-French writer Mehdi Charef’s *Tea in the Harem* to come to terms with her own identity against popular attitudes of what defines a “real African-American.” She admitted that Ahmad “allowed [her] to think through the heterogeneity of Black American experiences” and inspired the need for a collective cry against institutional and systemic racism primarily based on “colours of skin” (Ahmad 202).

Another student, a political refugee from Nepal, chose “Illegal Immigrants: The Rhetoric and Politics” as the topic for her final essay. Throughout her essay, she reinforced the need to be mindful against normalizing and legitimizing terms like “illegal” immigrants, suggesting that use of such terms by people in power could have long lasting impact on individuals escaping from war, poverty, violence, or/and religious/political persecution in their own countries. Reading Ahmad helped her to un-silence her pangs of being addressed as “illegal,” to which she writes: “Words matter!” and unabashedly critiques the popular usage of the term that “masks over the complex realities experienced by immigrants thereby denying them the right to create and tell their own stories.” Drawing her argument from the collection’s reference to David Dabydeen, Warsan Shire, Francisco Jimenez, Mehdi Charef, and Pauline Kaldas, the student reflects on her identity as a “stateless person” in “perpetual search for a home.” What emerged from the narratives in the collection is that students, irrespective of their identities, reflected on their own journeys and engaged in a dialogue with the socio-political events of the time. This intersection of personal narratives, narrative analysis, and political events provided students with an agency that was both personal and political.

While *Migration Literature* offered an engaging platform for students in an immigrant-friendly classroom, it could also do such work in a classroom where people don’t perceive themselves as immigrants or are hostile to migration. These stories of common people with everyday struggles and memories make the book a gateway for understanding diversity, transnational literature, and the interdependent relationship of our natural, social, cultural, and political worlds. Further, by offering a wide variety of immigrant

narratives to unacquainted readers, the book could help counter anti-immigrant rhetoric and prevent people from pitying, exoticizing, or homogenizing immigrant experiences.

In a final, powerful crossing of routes, this book brought Ahmad and me, both immigrants and academics, together again in a Queens classroom where all students identified themselves in some way or other as immigrants. When I invited Dr. Ahmad as a guest speaker to my class, it turned out to be a celebratory moment of recognizing untold crossings and journeys. Upon Dr. Ahmad’s request, students all shared the meanings and origin of their names. This created a beautiful collage of narratives about families, countries, cultures, and religions: each name symbolized a story of migration. While this could be deemed a Queens-based project—Queens being one of the most diverse boroughs in the country—*Migration Literature* weaves cultures, borders, times, and space and proves that we all have migration stories to tell.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>*The Penguin Book of Migration Literature* edited by Dohra Ahmad, foreword by Edwidge Danticat (2019), 281 pages.

<sup>2</sup> Reports in *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and “Fox News.”



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://www.library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://www.library.pitt.edu/dscribe/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.library.pitt.edu/).