

**American Literature of the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – the  
Beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century  
Multiculturalism**

**Literary activity of Maya Angelou (born 1928)**

**1. “Melting pot” as a leading characteristic feature in American literature of the 50-70<sup>th</sup> years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.**

In the [United States](#), continuous mass immigration had been a feature of economy and society since the first half of the 19th century. There was no fiction that the immigrants would return: immigration was seen as a permanent choice for a new country. The absorption of the stream of immigrants became, in itself, a prominent feature of the national [myths](#), along with the [expansion westwards](#).

In the early twentieth century, the playwright Israel Zangwill coined the phrase “melting pot” to describe how immigrants from many different backgrounds came together in the United States. The “melting pot” metaphor assumed that over time the distinct habits, customs, and traditions associated with particular groups would disappear as people assimilated into the larger culture. A uniquely American culture would emerge that would accommodate some elements of diverse immigrant cultures, such as holiday traditions and language phrases, in a new context.

[Melting Pot](#) is the idea of the society where all the immigrant cultures are mixed and amalgamated without state intervention. The Melting Pot implied that each individual immigrant, and each group of immigrants, assimilated into American society at their own pace, improving their income and [social status](#) on the way. It reflected and influenced official policy: although language courses were offered, they were rarely compulsory. As a result, several immigrant communities maintained a non-English language for generations. The nature of American national identity, with its emphasis on symbolic [patriotism](#), allegiance, national values and national myths, facilitated the assimilation of immigrants. The Melting Pot attitude did not require a detailed knowledge of American history, acquisition of a complex [cultural heritage](#), or English with an American accent. It allowed interest in the culture of the country of origin, and family ties with that country. In practice, the original culture disappeared within two generations. An Americanized (and often stereotypical) version of the original nation's cuisine, and its holidays, survived.

The Melting Pot concept has been criticized, as an idealized version of

the assimilation process.

## **2. Multiculturalism as one of the leading trends in American literature of the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – the Beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.**

Since the 1960s, scholars and political activists, recognizing that the “melting pot” concept fails to acknowledge that immigrant groups do not, and should not, entirely abandon their distinct identities, embraced multiculturalism and diversity. Racial and ethnic groups maintain many of their basic traits and cultural attributes. The curriculum, which had for decades relied upon the “melting pot” metaphor as an organizing framework, began to employ the alternative notion of the “American mosaic.” Multiculturalism, in the context of the “American mosaic,” celebrates the unique cultural heritage of racial and ethnic groups, some of whom seek to preserve their native languages and lifestyles. In a sense, individuals can be Americans and at the same time claim other identities, including those based on racial and ethnic heritage, gender, and sexual preference.

**Multiculturalism or cultural pluralism** (see *Glossary*).

Multiculturalism is not limited to official policy. As a philosophy it began its evolution, first as part of philosophy's [pragmatism](#) movement at the end of the nineteenth century in Britain and in the United States, then as political and cultural pluralism by the turn of the twentieth.

The term ‘multiculturalism’ emerged in the 1960s in Anglophone countries in relation to the cultural needs of non-European migrants. It now means the political accommodation by the state and/or a dominant group of all minority cultures defined first and foremost by reference to race or ethnicity; and more controversially, by reference to nationality, aboriginality, or religion, the latter being groups that tend to make larger claims and so tend to resist having their claims reduced to those of immigrants.

In the Western English-speaking countries multiculturalism as an official national policy started in [Canada](#) in 1971 and followed by [Australia](#) in 1973. It was quickly adopted by most member-states in the [European Union](#), as official policy.

In the [United States](#) multiculturalism is not an official policy at the federal level. At the state level, it is sometimes associated with English-Spanish bilingualism. However, the government, in recent years, has moved to support many multiculturalists’ policies. For instance,

California drivers can take their exams in a number of languages as they can in most Canadian provinces.

The word “multiculturalism” appeared in the American press in the early 1970s, and multiculturalism became [commonplace](#) by the 1980s. Multiculturalism has been [provocative](#) because it represented intensely held, conflicting perceptions of American society, principles, and standards. Many viewed it as the fulfilment of America's quest for equality of racial and ethnic groups and women. Many others have seen it as the [subversion](#) of the nation's unifying values.

### **3. The types of multiculturalism:**

–**Conservative multiculturalism** is that reflects views that are "embedded in the self-serving, self-congratulatory and profoundly imperialist" attitudes of colonialism. Basically, this is the view that reflects the idea of the white man's burden, to educate and improve the lesser being.

–**Liberal multiculturalism** focuses on cultural diversity, celebrating ethnic variety, and teaching tolerance. It assumes the existence of pre-existing cultures, which relate to, and interact with, each other, but does not examine the hierarchies of power underpinning these interactions.

–**Left-liberal** multiculturalism "emphasizes cultural difference" and that these differences are important in defining who Americans are.

–**Critical multiculturalism** sees multiculturalism as concerning ‘majorities’ as much as ‘minorities’, and is concerned with the institutions and practices forming the whole society. It sees inequalities of power, and racism, as central, emphasizes recognition and rights, and advocates the ‘multiculturalization’ of society.

### **4. The main representatives of the multiculturalism, its classification (see *Appendix 2*).**

### **5. Literary activity of Afro-American multiculturalists such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, James Baldwin, Toni Cade Bambara, Ralph Ellison etc.**

African American literature is the body of [literature](#) produced in the [United States](#) by writers of [African](#) descent. Among the themes and issues explored in African American literature are the role of African Americans within the larger American society, African-American culture, [racism](#), [slavery](#), and [equality](#), a sense of home and more. African American writing has also tended to incorporate within itself oral forms such as [spirituals](#), sermons, [gospel music](#), [blues](#) and [rap](#). This oral poetry also appears in the African American tradition of

[Christian sermons](#), which make use of deliberate repetition, cadence and alliteration. African American literature—especially written poetry, but also prose—has a strong tradition of incorporating all of these forms of oral poetry.

**6. Literary activity of Maya Angelou** (born Marguerite Ann Johnson on April 4, 1928) is an [American poet](#), [memoirist](#), [actress](#) and an important figure in the [American Civil Rights Movement](#). She has been called "America's most visible black female autobiographer". Angelou is known for her series of six [autobiographies](#), starting with [I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings](#) (1969) which was nominated for a [National Book Award](#). Her volume of poetry, *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Diie* (1971) was nominated for the [Pulitzer Prize](#). She has been highly honored for her body of work, including being awarded over 30 honorary degrees.

## **American multiculturalism of the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – the Beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

### **Literary activity of Susan Nunes (born 1937)**

#### **1. The literary Activity of Asian-Americans such as Gish Jen, Frank Chew Chin, Amy Tan, Milton Murayama, Dwight Okita.**

"Asian person" in the United States is thought of as a person of Asian descent.

Although immigrants from Asia and Americans of Asian descent have been writing in the United States since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Asian American literature as a category of writing only came into existence in the early 1970s.

Since then, the field of Asian American literature and of Asian American [literary criticism](#) has grown remarkably. But defining "Asian American literature" remains a troublesome task. Most critics who have written about Asian American literature define it as being written by Asian Americans, and usually about Asian Americans.

A common topic is the challenges, both inner and outer, of assimilation in mainstream, white American society by Asian Americans.

#### **2. Literary activity of Susan Nunes (born 1937).**

**Susan Miho Nunes** is very interested in the mix of cultures that make up American life. Nunes, a native of Hawaii and now a resident of

California, has Japanese and Portuguese ancestry. Her son and nephews share this background, as well as different combinations of Jewish, Persian, African American, and American Indian ancestry.

Her interest in blended cultures is reflected in Nunes's book *The Last Dragon*.

### **3. Literary activity of Natives in the context of American Literature: Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo Tribe), Thomas King (Cherokee), N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa), Lance Henson, Louise Erdrich.**

Native Americans in the United States are the indigenous peoples in North America within the boundaries of the present-day continental United States, parts of Alaska, and the island state of Hawaii. They are composed of numerous, distinct tribes, states, and ethnic groups, many of which survive as intact political communities.

Contemporary Native Americans today have a unique relationship with the United States because they may be members of nations, tribes, or bands of Native Americans who have sovereignty or independence from the government of the United States. Their societies and cultures flourish within a larger population of descendants of immigrants (both voluntary and slave).

–**Leslie Marmon Silko** (born Leslie Marmon on [March 5, 1948](#) in [Albuquerque, New Mexico](#)) is a [Native American](#) writer of the [Laguna Pueblo](#) tribe, and one of the key figures in the second wave of the [Native American Renaissance](#).

–**Thomas King** (born [24 April 1943](#)) is a noted [novelist](#) and broadcaster who most often writes about Canada's [First Nations](#) and is an outspoken advocate for First Nations causes. He is of [Cherokee](#) and [Greek](#) descent.

–**Navarro Scott Momaday** (born [February 27, 1934](#)) is a [Native American \(Kiowa\)](#) writer. He is the son of the writer Natchee Scott Momaday and the painter Al Momaday, and was born on the Kiowa Reservation in [Lawton, Oklahoma, United States](#). His novel *House Made of Dawn* led to the breakthrough of Native American literature into the mainstream. It was awarded the [Pulitzer Prize for Fiction](#) in [1969](#). Momaday is the [Poet Laureate](#) of [Oklahoma](#). He has most recently been awarded a [2007 National Medal of Arts](#) by President George W. Bush.

**Mexican Literature. Pat Mora, Garry Soto as representatives of Mexican-American Literature. S. Cisneros, R. Anaya as representatives of Ibero-American Literature**

– **Sandra Cisneros** (born December 20, 1954) is a [Chicana](#) author and [poet](#) best known for her [novel](#) *The House on Mango Street*. She is also the author of *Caramelo*, published in 2002, *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991), *My Wicked Wicked Ways* (1987) and a collection of poems, *Loose Woman*. Her books and poetry have been translated into over a dozen languages, including Spanish, Ukrainian, French, German, Dutch, Italian, Norwegian, Japanese, Chinese, Turkish, and, most recently, into Greek, Thai, and Serbo-Croatian. Much of her writing is influenced by her Mexican heritage.

Cisneros is well known for her incorporation of Spanish into English texts.

– **Gary Soto** (born April [1952](#)) is an [American poet](#), a representative of Mexican-American Literature.

Soto was born and raised in [Fresno, California](#), to working-class Mexican-American parents. He had an older brother named Rick, and a younger sister named Debra. Soto lived in Fresno where he worked as a factory laborer.

He had very bad grades throughout school, but became interested in poetry in high school and began writing poetry while he attended [Fresno City College](#). Soto moved on to [California State University, Fresno](#) for his undergraduate degree, and then to the [University of California, Irvine](#), where he earned a [Master of Fine Arts](#) degree in 1976.

**Literary Activity of European-American Multiculturalists**

**1. The literary activity of European-American writers in the context of American mainstream such as K. Vonnegut, HC. Bukovski (Germans); C.Messud (French); O. Hijuelos (Hispanic); Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Tillie Olsen, Jonathan Safran Foer (Jew); Vladimir Nabokov, Joseph Brodsky (Russian); Askold Melnyczuk, Irene Zabytko (Ukrainian).**

–**The literary activity of Jonathan Safran Foer (born [1977](#))**

Jonathan Safran Foer is an [American](#) writer. He lives in [Brooklyn, New York](#), with his wife, the novelist [Nicole Krauss](#), and their son, Sasha. Born in [Washington, D.C.](#), Foer attended [Georgetown Day School](#) and [Princeton University](#), where he studied philosophy and

literature. Foer is the middle child of three sons. His older brother, [Franklin](#), is the editor of [The New Republic](#). His younger brother, [Joshua](#), is a freelance journalist specializing in science writing. Foer married Nicole Krauss in June 2004. Their first child, Sasha, was born in 2006.

He travelled to [Ukraine](#) in 1999 to research his grandfather's life. This trip resulted in the inspiration for his debut novel, *Everything Is Illuminated*, published in [2002](#). The book garnered him a National Jewish Book Award and a [Guardian First Book Award](#). *Everything Is Illuminated* was adapted to film in 2005 by the director [Liev Schreiber](#), with [Elijah Wood](#) in the lead role.

In his second novel, [Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close](#), published in [2005](#), Foer uses [9/11](#) as a backdrop for the story of 9-year-old Oskar Schell learning to deal with the death of his father in the [World Trade Center](#). *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* utilizes many nontraditional writing techniques. It follows multiple but interconnected storylines, is peppered with photographs of doorknobs and other such oddities, and ends with a 12-page flipbook. Foer's utilization of these techniques resulted in both glowing praise and harsh censure from critics. Despite diverse criticism, the novel sold briskly and was translated into several languages.

In spring of 2008 he taught writing for the first time, as a visiting professor of [intermediate fiction](#) at [Yale University](#).

**–The literary activity of Irene Zabytko (b. 1954).**

American short story writer Irene Zabytko was born in Chicago's Ukrainian neighborhood and took her undergraduate and graduate study at Vermont College. A proficient speaker of Ukrainian, she has lived in Ukraine and taught English language courses there. She is a past winner of the PEN Syndicated Fiction Project and has held fellowships at the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation, the Hambidge Center, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts and Sciences, and the Millay Colony for the Arts. She has been heard on "The Sound of Writing" program of National Public Radio. Her fiction has appeared in *Catholic Girls* (1992) and *Earth Tones* (1994). She is the author of *The Sky Unwashed* (2000), a novel based on people affected by the nuclear accident in Chernobyl during the 1980s. Recently she has published *When Luba Leaves Home: Stories* (2003), a collection of unified stories centered on a young Ukrainian-American woman and her connections with her home in Chicago.

## **2. Literary activity of Askold Melnyczuk (born 1954)**

Askold Melnyczuk has been director of creative writing at University of Massachusetts-Boston since Fall 2002. He is the author of three novels. His first, *What Is Told* was a New York Times Notable Book for 1994. His second novel, *Ambassador of the Dead*, published in May 2001, has been called “exquisite, original” by The Washington Post. The third novel *The House of Widows* was published in 2006.

Winner of the McGinnis Award in Fiction, he has also been awarded grants from the Massachusetts Cultural Council in fiction, poetry, and non-fiction. He has published stories, poems, translations, and reviews in many popular newspapers. He has also taught at Harvard University and Boston University, where he edited *AGNI*, which he founded in 1972, until July 2002. Askold Melnyczuk founded *AGNI* in 1972 as an undergraduate at Antioch College.

Askold Melnyczuk has been interested in Buddhism (see *Glossary*) since the early seventies. He's published several novels and edited a number of books, and currently teaches Creative Writing at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. He is married a famous short story writer and essayist Alexandra Robertson.

### **The novel *What Is Told* (1994)**

*What Is Told* is a masterful novel that sprints across generations, centuries and continents. In a spirited narrative that travels from old Ukraine to New Jersey, Askold Melnyczuk follows his characters through the betrayals of war and the promises of marriage.

Zenon and Nataalka Zabobon marry the day Archduke Ferdinand is shot in Sarajevo. When Nataalka wins the battle of the bedroom, Zenon throws his energies into making sure his country doesn't completely disappear from the map. His brother Stefan, meanwhile, renounces the abstractions of nationalism for the certain pleasures of Paris and his two mistresses, a mother and her daughter.

Transplanted to the strange soil of the new world by the upheavals of World War II, the family finds itself unprepared for the subtle sabotages of peacetime suburbia. With the ghosts of their extraordinary past never far away, the voyagers resort to strategies learned in the struggle against the Tartars, Nazis, and Communists. The results are as comic as they are unexpected.

In *What Is Told* Melnyczuk reinvents, with humor and compassion, the story of a people long hidden behind the Iron Curtain. His novel is a reminder that history is not something that happens only to others.



### **The novel *Ambassador of the Dead* (2001)**

One Sunday morning, Nick Blud, a successful Boston physician, is home in bed when he receives a phone call from Adriana Kruk, the mother of a boyhood friend. The beautiful Adriana, who once vacationed at her family's luxurious summer home on the Black Sea, now lives in a run-down apartment in New Jersey. Abandoned by her husband and estranged from her sons, she summons Nick back to his old neighborhood, where something unspeakable has happened – exactly what, no one is willing to say.

*Ambassador of the Dead* is a harrowing tale of ambitions gone awry, and an unflinching meditation on exile and assimilation and the cost of love.

### **The novel *House of Widows* (2006)**

In the wake of his father's suicide, James keeps three items--his father's military uniform, a glass jar, and a letter in a foreign language--and goes on an odyssey around the world in search of his father's past. A novel of intrigue that is played across decades, continents, and generations by Melnyczuk “Late one night, a week after Father's suicide, I finished sweeping the bulk of my inheritance into four giant trash bags, and heaved them into the Dumpster at the construction site around the corner from his apartment. Then I sat down at the two-person coffee table in the middle of his kitchen, the fluorescent light loud as cicadas, and examined the three things I'd kept”.

The three things that James kept become the keys to unlocking the door on a past James never imagined while growing up amid the security of Boston's north shore, and they send him on an odyssey across England, Austria, and Ukraine. Along the way, he meets his dying aunt Vera, the matriarch of a mysterious branch of the family. His mission puts him face-to-face with the international sex trade, a displaced Palestinian girl with streaked pink hair and attitude to spare, and a violent world in which he is ultimately implicated. From old America, new Europe, and the timeless Middle East, James learns what it means to live in the webbed world of the twenty-first century.

In *The House of Widows*, Askold Melnyczuk offers a searing exploration of the individual's role in the inexorable assault of the history.