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# The Salvific Value of Islamic perspectives on English Literature

BY: MD. MAHMUDUL HASAN SOURCE: ISLAMICITY MAY 19, 2024



Many believe that Islam and English literature are mutually exclusive. Some people may even shudder at the thought of integrating one into the other. In this essay, I argue that Islamic perspectives on English literature can rescue the subject from irrelevance and elimination in Muslim societies.

The global reach of English literature is often greeted with disquiet, as it is considered a corollary to British colonial expansion. What is more, the study of the subject is generally believed to be unsuited to the needs of non-British or non-Western readers. In a 2019

essay, Esmaeil Zeiny of Tehran's Kharazmi University argues that the reading of this literary tradition is interpreted as "celebrating the Anglo-American canonical literature".

The 2007 Nobel laureate in literature, British-Zimbabwean writer Doris Lessing had limited schooling, was a high school dropout, and stopped receiving formal education at the age of fourteen. In *Doris Lessing: The poetics of change* (1994), the US literary scholar Gayle Greene states: "When she was seven Lessing was sent to school at the Roman Catholic Convent in Salisbury [now Harare], and at thirteen she transferred to the Girls High School, also in Salisbury, but withdrew at fourteen".

In other words, Lessing did not attend tertiary education at all and was largely an autodidact or self-taught. In 1982, she was asked if she regretted not studying at university. Lessing's response was:

*But I'm glad that I was not educated in literature and history and philosophy, which means that I did not have this Eurocentered thing driven into me, which I think is the single biggest hang-up Europe has got. It's almost impossible for anyone in the West not to see the West as the God-given gift to the world. (Quoted in Hazelton)*

Clearly, Lessing detests the replacement of indigenous knowledge systems with Eurocentric education and correlates humanities subjects like English literature with colonial hegemony over the (formerly) colonized.

Likewise, in *Culture and imperialism* (1993), Edward Said characterizes imperialism as "an educational movement". In the same vein, in her essay "Currying favor: The politics of British educational and cultural policy in India, 1813-1854" (1988), Said's student Gauri Viswanathan of New York's Columbia University believes:

*The English literary text functioned as a surrogate Englishman in his highest and most perfect state.... The split between the material and the cultural practices of colonialism is nowhere sharper than in the progressive rarefaction of the rapacious, exploitative, and ruthless actor of history into the reflective subject of literature.*

During the British colonial period, Englishmen acted as colonial administrators and harbingers of imperial modernity in different parts of the world. Since their departure, that cultural role of spreading British values has been partly played by English literary texts. They make the colonized glance away from imperial plunder and pillage, and immerse themselves into various strands of literary and philosophical musings. According to John McLeod of the UK's University of Leeds,

*The teaching of English literature in the colonies must be understood as part of the many ways in which Western colonial powers such as Britain asserted their cultural and moral superiority while at the same time devaluing indigenous cultural products.*

All these arguments suggest that the introduction of English literature in the colonies helped reinforce the notion of British cultural dominance. As a result, it reduced indigenous literature to the level of a provincial, inferior, and inchoate culture.

Indigenous Canadian but Western educated scholar Marie Battiste discusses the (ir)relevance of English literature to postcolonial societies. She “speaks with an authoritative double consciousness” and “provides important empirical perspectives aligning Western educational systems with coloniality”.

In a 1998 essay, Battiste argues: “We cannot continue to allow Aboriginal students to be given a fragmented existence in a curriculum that does not mirror them, nor should they be denied understanding the historical context that has created the fragmentation”.

It is perhaps worth mentioning here that, in 1968, the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o and his colleagues Taban Lo Liyong and Peter Aduor Anyumba of the English Department at the University of Nairobi wrote a note titled "On the abolition of the English Department". They sought to make a case against the dominance of English literature in Africa and, by extension, other non-Western societies. As a result, the English Department at the University of Nairobi was renamed to the Department of Literature.

In that memo, the three formidable Kenyan literary scholars stated: "For any group it is better to study representative works which mirror their society rather than to study a few isolated 'classics,' either of their own or of a foreign culture".

The word "mirror" in the above quote and in Marie Battiste's paper is important. Literary texts – Western or Eastern – that students are taught should mirror their present-day, pervasive concerns as well as the life and struggles of the underprivileged of their time.

They should reflect comparable social realities in the wider world that we inhabit. The course content of literature classes should be relevant to students' lives and should encourage their engagement and interest.

For example, in terms of the context and reflection of reality, Charles Dickens' novel *Oliver Twist* (1839) is relevant to our time, without losing its own historical context. Its major themes – such as corruption, criminality, injustice, poverty, and an unfeeling society – have resonances with present-day social conditions in many parts of the world.

Therefore, the novel can be characterized as a global text of enormous scope and with worldwide appeal. It compels readers to contextualize the experiences of the titular protagonist in their surroundings and acknowledge that the form of life in which the novel was produced is not unique.

When teaching *Oliver Twist* to Muslim students, an educator can easily relate Dickens' portrayal of oppression, exploitation, and degradation of vulnerable groups in society to Islam's strong,

primordial emphasis on justice and on ending all forms of injustice. The Qur'an [\(7:29\)](#) states, "Say: My Lord enjoins justice."

Another Qur'anic verse makes a clarion call for all to work towards the common goal of creating a society free from oppression. It reads: "And how could you refuse to fight in the cause of God and of the utterly helpless men and women and children who are crying, 'O our Sustainer! Lead us forth [to freedom] out of this land whose people are oppressors, and raise for us, out of Thy grace, a protector, and raise for us, out of Thy grace, one who will bring us succour!'" ([Qur'an 4:75](#)).

Therefore, correlating the central thesis of Dickens' *Oliver Twist* to Islam will lend the text greater legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of its Muslim readers.

In March 2023, the prestigious *The New Yorker* magazine printed Nathan Heller's essay "The end of the English major". As the title indicates, the essay argues that enrolment in English departments at US universities is "in free fall".

While humanities subjects are losing to the bread-and-butter fields of STEM (Science Technology Engineering and Maths) in the West, the continuation of the study of English literature in Muslim-majority countries is at risk for its underlying Eurocentrism, foreignness, and irrelevance to Muslim realities.

In a time when the study of English literature is at risk of dying out or disappearing from the syllabi, seeing English literary texts through the lens of Islam will establish relevance and context for the Muslim audience and will ground them in Muslim societies.

In other words, in light of decolonizing or indigenizing Eurocentric education, providing Islamic perspectives on English literature will establish the importance, significance, and applicability of this literary tradition to Muslims. That is to say, interpreting English texts through the lens of Islam has a salvific value in terms of continuing the teaching and learning of the subject in Muslim-majority countries.

The pinnacle of the glory and global prestige of English literature is perhaps behind us. Therefore, learning its texts from Muslim perspectives may generate new insights and provide it with new trajectories of academic research. This new lens will make English literature relevant to, and prolong its prevalence in, Muslim societies by way of exploring points of convergence and divergence between Islam and the literary tradition.

Needless to say, any literary tradition bears the risk of anachronism if it loses relevance to the real world of its audience or if it does not enrich readers' understanding of the meaning of life. What students encounter in the text should offer an analysis of the past and present (oppressive) social conditions and have a perennial appeal to the reader globally. This will spare English literature the charges of Eurocentric bias, disconnect, or anachronism.

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