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TEACHING ENGLISH LITERATURE AT IIUM:
ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVES ON SELECTED
TWENTIETH-CENTURY TEXTS

Md Mahmudul Hasan

Abstract:

Among the humanities and social sciences disciplines, English literature is perhaps the most contentious subject as it carries subtle ideological and cultural impacts and significance. Right from the beginning of its introduction in British India and elsewhere, the most prominent consideration was its inherent worth as a carrier of values and norms. Under the surface of its seemingly value-neutral tag, English literature promotes ideas, beliefs and philosophies which can potentially influence its learners and practitioners. Based on this theoretical premise, this paper will establish the necessity of critically evaluating English literary texts in a Muslim setting and of bringing in Islamic perspectives in pedagogical practices at such an Islamic university as International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). It will discuss a few twentieth-century English literary works and suggest ways of looking at them from the Islamic viewpoint.

Keywords: English literature, values, philosophy, IIUM

Introduction

Since the demise of classical, post-Enlightenment European colonialism, many former colonized countries have sought to re-examine their positions in the ‘postcolonial’ era and to reassert their national-cultural identity which is endangered by the continuing colonialist legacy and overarching dominance of Western ideas as well as artistic and intellectual products. As part of their resistance efforts to withstand seemingly perpetual and permeating Eurocentric, colonialist epistemic domination and to revitalize their indigenous knowledge, traditions and values, they have focused on decolonizing the education system. In the movement of the decolonization or indigenization of education, the most contentious subjects are those belonging to the social sciences and humanities, as these are considered value-laden, highly subjective and reflective of the site of their production (colonialist Europe), hence part of the wider project of cultural imperialism.

Eurocentric knowledge is now highly contested or at least subject to a variety of political and cultural debates, and open to scholarly and pedagogical scrutiny. Among the social sciences and humanities disciplines currently taught at universities around the world, English literature is perhaps the most culturally charged subject that is saturated with Western values and norms which are entrenched in the consciousness of many of its practitioners. It carries Western values in an almost imperceptible manner, and thus helps establish a subtle form of cultural domination of the West as well as the mental colonization of the intelligentsia in the East. Hence, scholars from postcolonial societies seek to contest the cultural-educational domination of the West by approaching subjects like English literature critically.

In the discourses of the decolonization or indigenization of education, it is now firmly established that “older, conventional, Eurocentric approaches” to knowledge “are no longer of relevance” in non-Western societies.¹ The need for decolonizing or indigenizing education is felt in almost all non-Western societies. As a mark of

¹ Madhu Kasiram, “The emigration of South African social workers: Using social work education to address gaps in provision,” *Social Work Education* 28.6 (2009): 646-654.

defiance to the continuous assault by the dominant, (neo-)colonialist Western culture and as part of an attempt to resist the academic imperialism of English, there is an education reform movement in many non-Western countries which seeks to root the pursuit of education in native cultural values, traditions and philosophies. It is in this spirit that, in the context of the African continent, some revealing questions are now being asked, such as: “When are African feet ever going to divorce European shoes?” and also, “is the West still in charge of the cannons of African scholarship?”² Such an awareness among the ‘former’ colonized to highlight their educational and cultural differences and to ascertain their indigenous, distinct cultural identity is reflected in their approach to knowledge, especially with regard to the humanities and social sciences disciplines. In order to contest the uncritical transplantation of “Western curricula, labels and methods,” which are culturally and psychologically unfit for a given society, postcolonial scholars intend to transform “education in such a way that it will be representative of all the education realities” and the “specificities of conditions” in a country.³

The introduction of English literature in the colonies was part of the imperial strategy and colonial education policy. Edward Said rightly regards imperialism as “an educational movement,”⁴ as colonial education policy was designed to culturally influence the intellect of indigenous peoples and thus to alienate them from local religio-cultural traditions. Needless to say, English studies were introduced in the colonies chiefly to sustain imperial hegemony, to universalize Western ideas and to trigger a form of mimicry of Western models among the colonized. In pre-WWI Britain, English literature was not taught at universities, as it was considered suitable only for “second- or third-rate minds” and “only as a pastime for lesser minds.”⁵ Most ironically, the subject was first introduced not

² William Chitumba, “University Education for Personhood through Ubuntu Philosophy,” *International Journal of Asian Social Science* 3.5 (2013): 1275.

³ C. T. Viljoen, “Facing the educational challenges in South Africa: An educophilosophical reflection,” *Koers-Bulletin for Christian Scholarship* 63.1/2 (1998): 14.

⁴ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, (New York: Vintage, 1994/1993), 269.

⁵ Robert Eaglestone, *Doing English*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2009), 10 & 12.

in Britain, but in British India in 1835, and that mainly to perpetuate intellectual, cultural, linguistic, and mental colonization of the natives and thus to facilitate the exploitation of colonized lands, peoples and resources.

In addition to the colonialist context of the introduction of English literature and its rootedness in Western/(neo-)European values and cultural assumptions, the subject has many other features which need to be critically analyzed in research and pedagogical practices, especially when taught at universities in non-Western countries. Importantly, the teaching and learning of English literature in the former colonized countries contributes to constructing an alienated identity of the postcolonial, postmodern national elites. Therefore, an uncritical reception of English literature and approaching it to adopt and promote the Western way of life can be regarded as an enduring trait of colonial surrogacy of British culture. Given this theoretical understanding, this paper will analyze selected twentieth-century English literary texts and will discuss how de-contextualizing, and failing to distinguish between the good and the evil in English literary texts, may contribute to the proliferation of alien views and way of life in such non-Western societies as Muslim-majority countries.

Given this theoretical premise, this paper will investigate how ideas described in twentieth-century English literary texts can possibly be approached and received in pedagogy and practice while teaching them at an Islamic university such as the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). The University's constitution enshrines the vision of the Islamization of Human Knowledge (IOHK) and the concept of seeing ideas in various disciplines from Islamic perspectives in all modes of academic work such as "teaching, research, consultancy, dissemination of knowledge and the development of academic excellence."⁶ The Department of English Language and Literature (DELL) is the largest division among the human sciences subjects in the Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences (KIRKHS). Established in 1990 and the largest faculty of the university, KIRKHS perhaps carries the

⁶ International Islamic University Malaysia, *Memorandum and Articles of Association*, (Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press, 2002), 4.

greatest implications for pedagogy and research as far as IOHK is concerned. This is because its “formation represents a drive to integrate Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences disciplines as part of a comprehensive educational reform for the betterment of mankind.”⁷ Hence, being part of IIUM, and more specifically being a department of KIRKHS, DELL carries wider significance, as it is a vibrant intellectual site for its practitioners and students to be familiar with Western ideas and to bring Islamic perspectives in its academic culture. So its academics are professionally committed to the principle of IOHK and morally obligated to bring about the integration of knowledge and to bring in Islamic perspectives when dealing with the thoughts and ideas of Western writers. It is in this spirit of the vision of IIUM that, this paper intends to discuss the colonial genesis of the subject in order to establish the urgency to see it critically. It will also look at selected texts of twentieth-century English literature from an Islamic perspective to show that such an intellectual approach to English literary texts is pertinent and feasible.

The colonial genesis of introducing English literature

As discussed before, education has been used by European colonizers to strengthen colonial grip on colonized societies. To put it differently, classical European colonialism had two most prominent strategic features: military and educational. While, to use Kipling’s words, it was important for the imperialist ‘navies’ ‘in heavy harness’ to engage in “savage wars of peace” to establish “[d]ominion over palm and pine”, colonial rule could not be sustained without conquering the minds of the colonized people which was best done through education. This is why, when invading Egypt in 1798, Napoleon Bonaparte was accompanied by a full shipload of ‘savants’ (pundits) along with 55,000 soldiers and sailors. Similarly, the British East India Company, while trading and conquering vast areas of the South Asian subcontinent by the military force, also brought Western scholars who were divided into two groups: Anglicists and

⁷ Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia, accessed on Jun. 5, 2015 from <<http://www.iiu.edu.my/irkhs>>.

Orientalists. At a time when colonial administrators were lustily exploiting the indigenous people in both the political and economic spheres, these intellectuals employed their mental energy and scholarly resilience to conduct research and produce knowledge in order to deepen the servitude of the minds of the colonized and thus to render them perpetually dependent on the colonizers intellectually and culturally. The introduction of English literature in British colonies was driven by the same colonialist tendency to continue to culturally dominate the colonized as part of their indirect strategies to keep the latter subjugated without using the military force.

In *Doing English: A Guide for Literature Students* (2009), the British academic Robert Eaglestone provides a succinct account of the history and motive of introducing English literature at institutions of higher learning in the colony, especially in India. According to him, in the academia of pre-WWI Britain, English literature was looked down upon by university professors. While continental literature – especially in Latin, Greek and Italian – was regarded highly and taught at British universities, English literature was deemed to be below the level of academic attention or below higher literary or scholarly significance. Attempts to introduce the subject at Oxford University failed because of stiff intellectual opposition to it. As discussed before, the subject was considered appropriate only for the people of the lower strata of society and for the marginalized who had no access to formal education or people who were considered of lesser intellect. Accordingly, it was read informally mainly by two groups of people – the working class people and women – who could not afford, or were not permitted, to enter universities. However, in Britain it was first started as a subject of study at the University of Cambridge in 1917, many decades after it was done so in British India. After WWI other universities in Britain followed suit and started to introduce the subject, as there was a perceived need to “re-civilise the native savages,”⁸ that is, the working class people in Britain. In other words, even in Britain, English literature was embraced as an academic subject at universities because of its perceived, inherent potential to be used as a tool for spreading ideas and values and for the civilizing mission. Interestingly, the subject

⁸ Eaglestone, *Doing English*, 12.

arrived in British colonies for the same purpose, that is, to civilize (read Westernize) the colonized. Therefore, an academic position of regarding English literary texts as value-free, objective, ahistorical or content-neutral, *à la* art for art's sake, is untenable historically and in practice.

Perhaps, one of the greatest ironies in the history of modern learning is the fact that English literature was first introduced as a subject of study in India, not in England. As it is widely known, up until 1858, British government ruled India indirectly through the East India Company. As proselytization was used as a colonial tool and as it was believed that Christian Indians would be “more supportive of the Company’s colonial exploitation,”⁹ until 1813 the colonial government through the East India Company highly encouraged and wholeheartedly supported Christian missionary activities. Later on, the British authority rethought about their colonial strategy and was looking for an alternative to Christian missionary work. Since Christianity was being spread by attracting people to its stated message of love and mercy, it obviously involved a moral question which the colonizers were reluctant to face. In other words, they were not ready to hear from the colonized Indians questions like: If Christianity were really a religion of love and mercy, how come the Christian colonizers were exploiting us, the Indians, and plundering our land and resources?

Hence, the colonizers were on the lookout for an outwardly value-neutral and seemingly objective — in actual fact, of course, deeply ideologically constituted — way of spreading Western, colonial values. Accordingly, they turned their attention to the Indian education system and sought to reformulate it in light of imperial necessities which would help sustain colonial paternalism. Thomas Babington Macaulay’s statement mentioned below clearly indicates the real intention of the colonizers focusing on Indian education:

I have traveled across the length and breadth of India and I have not seen one person who is a beggar, who is a thief. Such wealth I have seen in this country, such high moral values, people of such caliber, that I do not think

⁹ Ibid., 11.

we would ever conquer this country, unless we break the very backbone of this nation, which is her spiritual and cultural heritage, and, therefore, I propose that we replace her old and ancient education system, her culture, for if the Indians think that all that is foreign and English is good and greater than their own, they will lose their self esteem, their native culture, and they will become what we want them, a truly dominated nation.¹⁰

The colonizers laid emphasis on the curriculum of Indian tertiary institutions where previously Arabic and Sanskrit were the two major subjects. However, in the run-up to reshuffling the Indian education system, there was a debate between the Anglicists and the Orientalists about whether to continue to teach these two subjects or not. The former wanted to get rid of Arabic and Sanskrit altogether and to teach Indian students exclusively English, whereas the latter wanted to teach all three subjects simultaneously. However, the dominant politician and historian Macaulay supported the Anglicists' stance. His political leverage made a huge difference in terms of influencing the British government and shaping its decision on Indian education. He made a persuasive statement, saying:

We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population.¹¹

¹⁰ Qtd. in B. Vithal Shetty, *World as Seen Under the Lens of a Scientist*, (Xlibris Corporation, 2009), 400.

¹¹ Qtd. in William Ferguson Beatson Laurie, *Distinguished Anglo-Indians*, (Asian Educational Services, 1999), 183.

Macaulay's argument helped the Anglicists win the debate, and since then English education has dominated the intellectual culture of the South Asian region in particular and gradually all other British colonies in general. On 7 March 1835, the governor-general of India, Lord William Bentinck, promulgated a law that put "the promotion of European literature and science among the natives of India"¹² at the forefront of the education system of the entire British India. Needless to say, English "replaced Persian as the official and court language in 1837" and "Lord Hardinge announced in 1844, that Indians who had received English education would get preference in all government appointments."¹³ Thus the motive was beyond any doubt to perpetually dominate Indian peoples without using the military force, to universalize English literature and to provincialize the education culture of the colony, and, finally, to generate a culture of mimicry among the colonized so that they imitate Western culture and thus subconsciously admire and adopt the British way of life.

It was in such a cultural context that English literature was first introduced as a university subject in British India. The spectre of the ulterior colonialist motive of introducing the subject is incontrovertible, as it is extensively discussed in postcolonial discourses. In this regard, John McLeod states that "the teaching of English literature in the colonies must be understood as part of the many ways in which Western colonial powers such as the Britain asserted their cultural and moral superiority while at the same time devaluing indigenous cultural products."¹⁴ Therefore, in the postcolonial world of diverse cultures and of neocolonial anxiety, there is a perceived urgency to reconstruct national identity and reject Western ideas, values and cultural modernity transmitted by such means as literary texts. Accordingly, it is widely believed that Western literature needs to be interpreted according to its colonialist genesis as well as the importance of preserving and revitalizing local religio-cultural values and worldviews.

¹² Qtd. in Yogesh Kumar Singh, *History of Indian Education System*. Ed. Ruchika Nath, (APH Publishing Corporation, 2005), 72.

¹³ Aparna Basu, "Essays in the History of Indian Education," *Concept*, 1982: 7.

¹⁴ John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 140.

As regards English literature, the need for such a mode of interpretation is ever more strongly felt. During the colonial period, the English people were there in the colony to spread Western culture. However, in the postcolonial world, the English literary texts have taken that role and continue disseminating Western ideas and uncensored knowledge, albeit in a systematic and well-structured process of indoctrination and orientation. Hence, Gauri Viswanathan views the introduction of English literature thus: “the English literary text functioned as a surrogate Englishman in his highest and most perfect state.”¹⁵ Therefore, it is important that this subject is taught at non-Western universities in a critical manner and with caution so that its practitioners remain immune from unwanted cultural influences. Despite the fact that English literature is inevitably entangled with colonial power and domination, academicians who approach the subject in an uncritical manner and spread Western ideas through pedagogical practices can understandably be regarded as complicit with Western cultural hegemony. Edward Said characterizes academicians with such tacit connivance with Western intellectual dominance as “regional surrogates.”¹⁶ In other words, professors involved in an uncritical reception of English literature and in disseminating Western values through the subject can be logically deemed as postcolonial native informants or comprador intellectuals who cater to a particular Western desire.

The above discussion shows that there is a recognized need to break away from Western academic structures and cultural influences, which heralded the decolonization or indigenization of education. In this respect, there is a strong convergence between Islamic educationists and postcolonial theorists, as both the groups feel a strong urgency to reformulate the contemporary education system chiefly in order to disabuse the learners of the heavy burden and untoward consequences of external intellectual dominance. Part of this resistance to the imposition of Western values and cultural hegemony through education is the integration of knowledge undertaking which is an alternative way of looking at conventional

¹⁵ Gauri Viswanathan, “The beginnings of English literary study in British India,” *Oxford Literary Review* 9.1 (1987): 23.

¹⁶ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 314.

learning from Islamic perspectives, especially in Muslim educational settings. In Muslim societies, this is perhaps the best way to withstand Western cultural imperialism and to address claims of global hegemony and the threat of an ever-advancing, postmodern vision of transcultural homogenization. More specifically, this intellectual approach to knowledge triggers the urgency to see English literary texts from Islamic viewpoints in order to shield their learners and practitioners of Muslim backgrounds from un-Islamic values that many English texts may proliferate. It equally seeks to assert and validate widely accepted moral values inherent in many English literary pieces. This is in line with the general approach of Muslims towards non-Islamic culture. As there is much in Western education which Islam “will accept as its own,” and there is also much that the religion “will reject as well.”¹⁷

Such an approach to this literary tradition is very much probable given the fact that the human condition is the primary concern of both Islam and literature, so it is pertinent to relate one to the other. However, it will require the scholars of English literary studies to adopt a didactic approach as opposed to the belletristic one that seeks to divorce literary work and criticism from religion and conventional morality or from wider intellectual and cultural concerns. More importantly, scholars who intend to undertake the academic task of critically viewing and evaluating English literary pieces from Islamic perspectives are required to be “endowed with a vast knowledge of the Qur’an and a firm grounding in” the subject.¹⁸ After establishing the urgency of looking at English literary pieces from Islamic perspectives, we will discuss some twentieth-century English authors and their works in order to provide examples of this academic and critical undertaking.

Islamic perspectives on selected twentieth-century texts

When it comes to twentieth-century English literature, including Islamic perspectives in the discussion of authors’ ideas is perhaps

¹⁷ Fazlur Rahman, “Islamization of knowledge: A response,” *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 5.1 (1988): 5.

¹⁸ Taha J. al-Alwani, “The Islamization of knowledge: Yesterday and today,” *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 12.1 (1995): 89.

more pertinent and certainly more suited to the phenomena and dynamics of this literary tradition. Twentieth-century Europe represented a more complex form of economic, social-political, religious and cultural change. So it was a potent breeding ground for the evolution of new, powerful thoughts and ideas, which British writers sought to address in literature. Ali Ashraf maintains:

The difficulty that twentieth century writers are faced with is the difficulty brought about by the lack of faith in anything spiritual. Man stands disintegrated; that is why some important writers have tried to re-integrate man by reformulating his concepts and by establishing man's nature in a new context. This is what Ezra Pound or Yeats or D. H. Lawrence have tried to do. But the difficulty lies in the esotericism of these writers and their inability to see that they are trying to create various kinds of disconnected concepts. Their partial realizations are marred by their claim to have realized the whole.¹⁹

The period generated a rich repertoire of philosophies and ideologies with which writers grappled in order to find meaning in life. Islam as a universal religion has its own responses to the challenges of the era dealt with in literary texts, especially those produced by British authors. So bringing in Islamic perspectives, when discussing twentieth-century British literary pieces of various ideological inclinations, is highly relevant.

Issues more pertinent to twentieth-century English literary texts include, and are not limited to, racism and colonialism, imperialism and anti-imperialism, feminism and women's suffrage, homosexuality and lesbianism, war and militarism, Marxism and socialism, humanism, pornography and blasphemy, nihilism, existentialism, the Great Depression and hopelessness and despair, modernism, high modernism, postmodernism, diaspora, decolonization, dadaism, confessional literary memoirs (expressing

¹⁹ Syed Ali Ashraf, "Islamic Principles and Methods in the Teaching of Literature," *British Journal of Religious Education* 1.2 (1978): 53.

the private and the personal), freedom of expression, postcolonialism, atheism and agnosticism, religious faith and secularism and skepticism, and the rise of Islamophobia. Islam has its own unique features and distinctive characteristics and perspectives on the various issues described in a myriad of twentieth-century British literary texts.

Having established the urgency and feasibility of looking at English texts from Islamic perspectives, in what follows, we will analyze a few twentieth-century literary pieces by way of discussing relevant issues in the light of Islamic teachings. The selection is made somewhat randomly, even though there is a sense of polarity in terms of ideological affiliation of the authors. However, the purpose of the discussion below is mainly to provide some sample analyses of English literary texts from Islamic perspectives.

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden"

Both appreciated and depreciated almost equally in literary criticism, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) is one of the most prominent English novels of the early modernist period.²⁰ The novel "functions as a lead in to the twentieth century" as it is tied to the period's sensibility of "cultural relativism, an awareness of the irrational and of the unconscious mind."²¹ Based on the novelist's colonial career experiences in Congo during the Belgian colonization of the country, it provides a vivid description of the racist treatment of the natives by European colonizers. The racial stereotyping of the local Congolese and the plundering of ivory from their land constitute the key issues in the novel. The novel glorifies London and river Thames as these are considered originators of the British

²⁰ For example, in "An image of Africa" (*The Massachusetts Review*, 1977: 782-794), Chinua Achebe severely critiques Conrad's representation of Africa and African people, whereas Charles P. Sarvan, "Racism and the *Heart of Darkness*," *International Fiction Review*, 1980, 7.1: 6-10, defends Conrad from the charge of racism.

²¹ Lynn M. Alexander, "Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1902)" August 1999. Accessed on 2 July 2015 from <<http://www.utm.edu/staff/lalexand/brnovel/heart.htm>>.

commonwealths, and it vilifies African settings as dark and tenebrous. More remarkably, the negative stereotypical depiction of African people as savages and cannibals resonates with the colonialist tropes of ethnocentrism, biological racism and Africa's primitiveness. Such discourse is intended to facilitate colonial exploitation of local resources.

Equally Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden" (1899) strikes an early twentieth-century note in provoking the debate of imperialism and anti-imperialism as it invited both positive and negative reflections and responses upon its first publication. The poet uses the euphemism of "white man's burden" to characterize imperialism. In the run-up to US colonisation of the Philippines, by penning the poem, he sought to encourage the doubting Americans to colonize the Filipinos whom they conquered from the Spanish in the Spanish-American War (1898) preceded by the Philippine Revolution or the Tagalog War (1896–1898) and followed by the Philippine-American War (1899–1902). The poet promotes colonial adventure by way of stereotyping Filipinos (and, for that matter, all non-Western peoples) as 'half-devil, half-child'. He constructs an artificial need for "the martial camaraderie and heroism of"²² imperialism and thus favours war and militarism – a stance he later regretted owing to the death of his only son Lt. John Kipling in 1915 in his first combat battle during WWI. Thus the poem is saturated with the sentiments of imperialism and war, two of the most common issues in twentieth century English literature.

In both the texts, the authors arguably endorse the so-called civilizing mission of European colonizers and spread Western ideas and images of the Other. All such imperial rhetoric and colonial excuses are used to exploit people of other races and different skin colours who are considered, to use Kipling's words, "lesser breed without the law" or intellectually deficient, hence subhuman and incapable of running their countries. Such imperialist arguments are based on a worldview that divides human beings with a view to creating an artificial racial hierarchy and separating those defined as the white superior race against those considered subordinated as the

²² Matthew Campbell, "Poetry and War" in *A Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry* edited by Neil Roberts, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 65.

non-white inferior race.

While handling such English literary texts that promote racist and colonialist ideas, Muslim lecturers are morally and religiously obligated to introduce students to the alternative worldview of Islam that is based on justice, egalitarianism, altruism, equity, love, compassion and mercy. In order to remove any notion of racial superiority or inferiority on the basis of descent or skin colour, lecturers at universities – especially those in Muslim settings – can logically inform students about the true state of the primordial equality of all human beings by referring to the various Qur’anic verses and Prophetic traditions.

Islam totally rejects any assumed differentiation among human beings on the basis of race or skin colour, as such racial hierarchies are constructed to breed and perpetuate social, political, and cultural inequalities among them. The Qur’an does not recognize any biological or genetic definition, difference or attributes of racial groups. So any race theory that is used as a political or cultural tool to justify discrimination and atrocities has no place in Islam. The religion declares time and again that all human beings have been originated from the same entity. In one place, the Qur’an says:

O MANKIND! Be conscious of your Sustainer, who has created you out of one living entity, and out of it created its mate, and out of the two spread abroad a multitude of men and women. And remain conscious of God, in whose name you demand [your rights] from one another, and of these ties of kinship. Verily, God is ever watchful over you! (Qur’an, 4:1)

However, the only difference that Islam recognizes between human beings is dependent on the content of their character. In other words, those who are God-conscious and possess commendable character are superior to those who are not. The Qur’an states:

O men! Behold, We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most

deeply conscious of Him. Behold, God is all-knowing, all-aware (Qur'an, 49: 13).

And among his wonders is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your tongues and colours: for in this, behold, there are messages indeed for all who are possessed of [innate] knowledge! (Qur'an, 30: 22)

While the Qur'an recognizes the variations of different tribes and nations and various tribal or national identities, it considers them as markers or means of identification and understanding the diversity among human beings and not as implements of or excuses for discrimination and exploitations. The diversity in creation is also a manifestation of God's power and blessing. Finally, Prophet Muhammad once and for all buried any sense of racial superiority or inferiority in a historic speech during his last pilgrimage. He unequivocally stated:

All mankind is from Adam and Hawa (Eve). An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a White has no superiority over a Black nor a Black has any superiority over a White except by piety and good action. Learn that every Muslim is a brother to every Muslim and that the Muslims constitute one brotherhood. Nothing shall be legitimate to a Muslim which belongs to a fellow Muslim unless it was given freely and willingly.²³

Islam provides an alternative worldview which outright rejects any notion of racial hierarchy and establishes the basic equality of all as human beings. When teaching English texts like *Heart of Darkness* and "The White Man's Burden," it is important that students are informed about the Islamic stance on race relations.

Colonialism is an outgrowth of the concept of genetic or biological superiority of a particular group of people over others. It is

²³ "The Last Sermon of Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.)" (n. d.). Accessed on July 3, 2015 from <<http://www.iiu.edu.my/deed/articles/thelastsermon.html>>.

a result of “an obsessive political belief that Europeans were superior in their intellect, ethnicity, race, color and human configuration than the other people of the globe.”²⁴ As Islam rejects any racist notion of superiority and inferiority among human beings on the basis of birth, descent or national and linguistic affiliations, it is outright opposed to the colonial exploitative measures. Muslim lecturers of English literature can touch on these issues when discussing such colonialist English literary texts.

W H Auden’s “The Shield of Achilles”

While there are a myriad English literary texts that advance ideas and concepts that go against the grain of Islamic principles, there are many others which promote values supported by Islam to a certain extent. One such text is W H Auden’s poem “The Shield of Achilles” (1952). In its attitude towards war and militarism, the poem is totally antithetical to “The White Man Burden.” Set against the brutal backdrop of military and civilian experiences during two great European wars, it artistically denounces the warmongering tendency among national leaders and shows that most wars are unnecessary and fought for the wrong reasons. Governments lead people to war and gather public support on a pack of lies. Eventually, wars are waged mainly to serve the interests of the few rather than the many. Auden also vividly describes the sufferings and the bewilderment of the ordinary soldiers and exposes the hypocrisies of the army generals who simply give orders to the troops and are not ready to face the ordeals and tribulations of the actual war zone. He also shows how war destroys fundamental human attributes like love, mercy, compassion and fellow feeling for others. When human beings are exposed to atrocities and incidents of cruelty, violence and murders of war, they gradually become immune to its deleterious effects. Exposure to hostilities can gradually cause one to be insensitive to the sufferings of the affected population. As a result, both the casualties and the survivors of the violence of war go through a process of

²⁴ Mahboob A. Khawaja, “Western Imperialism & the Tyranny of Colonization,” *Onislam.net*, January 12, 2012. Accessed on July 3, 2014 from <<http://www.onislam.net/english/politics/middle-east/455357-western-imperialism-a-the-unspoken-tyranny-of-colo.html>>.

death – the former suffer mortal death and the latter, spiritual death. In other words, sufferers of war lose lives as well as the human sensitivity to human miseries.

When discussing such texts as “The Shield of Achilles,” it is important to inform students that Islam promotes peace and conciliation and condemns unnecessary war and hostilities. Furthermore, lecturers should also highlight the fact that, contrary to consistent propaganda against Islam, the religion promotes justice, peace, love and mercy among human beings and is totally opposed to hypocrisy and all sorts of oppression. Given the global, political and cultural context of the twenty-first century, when Islam is frequently and categorically portrayed as a hostile religion bent upon killing non-Muslims and ordinary people, it is crucial that lecturers inform the students about the Islamic viewpoint on war. Such an intellectual attempt will serve multiple purposes. It will strengthen the notion that English literary pieces are not homogenous; some promote values which are partially or completely compatible with Islam, while some others propagate ideas which are not in consonance with Islam. It will also help introduce to students important aspects of Islamic teachings and help clarify misunderstandings and propaganda against the religion. It will likewise help remove misgivings involving Islamic terms like *jihad*. Talking about Islam’s stance on war, the great British writer, Marmaduke Pickthall, states:

There is not one word in the Holy Qur’an to justify murder or massacre under any circumstances whatsoever. All there is a command for open, honourable warfare, under certain plain conditions, and with limitations which made Islamic warfare, by its mercy as compared with other warfare, a great factor in the success of Islam as a religion: for it surprised the people used to utter ruthlessness in war.²⁵

While Islam does not encourage wars and physical combats, it also does not rule them out altogether if there is a need for them. For

²⁵ Marmaduke William Pickthall, *The cultural side of Islam*, (New Delhi: Kitan Bhaban, 1927), 125.

example, there are specific circumstances that require Muslims to get engaged in combat operation. If a group of people are attacked by an aggressive force, depending on circumstances, they have every right to fight back and defend themselves. In this regard, the Qur'an states: "Permission (to fight) is given to those upon whom war is made because they are oppressed, and most surely Allah is well able to assist them" (Qur'an, 22: 39). If a country or a community is unjustly attacked and Muslims have the ability and power to counter such offensive intrusions and invasions, they are required to launch a war to protect the defending people. If a government oppresses its own citizens and Muslims are in a position to play a role to stop such tyranny and persecution, they cannot simply remain silent on the plea of that country's sovereignty. If necessary, Muslims must use force to bring about justice there. If Muslims notice that wrongdoers and willful despots oppress people and they have the capability and power to protect the victims, they are religiously obligated to intervene and stop persecution. Importantly, in all such cases, Muslims can launch a war only under strict ethical conditions and with proper approval from legitimate authority. The Qur'an states:

And if two parties of the believers quarrel, make peace between them; but if one of them acts wrongfully towards the other, fight that which acts wrongfully until it returns to Allah's command; then if it returns, make peace between them with justice and act equitably; surely Allah loves those who act equitably (49: 9).

The crux of Islam's stance on war and militarism is dependent on its primordial concept of justice. It is the question of justice that determines whether Muslims will need to be engaged in war and military offensive. In this regard, Islam does not differentiate between Muslims and non-Muslims. If able, Muslims are required to oppose and withstand the oppressors even if they are Muslims, and equally, they are bound to protect the victims even if they are non-Muslims. Islam is all for justice, truth, compassion and the common good and it is against all forms of injustice, oppression and corruption regardless of whether they are committed by Muslims or non-Muslims. Even in the run-up to war or during and after such combat engagements, injustice against anyone cannot be justified. The Qur'an unequivocally declares:

O you who have attained to faith! Be ever steadfast in your devotion to God, bearing witness to the truth in all equity; and never let hatred of anyone lead you into the sin of deviating from justice. Be just: this is closest to being God-conscious. And remain conscious of God: verily, God is aware of all that you do (5: 8).

When a lecturer or educator with reasonable understanding of Islam's stance on war teaches W H Auden's "The Shield of Achilles" he can choose to analyze the poem from an Islamic perspective. While Auden seems to reject the necessity of war, Islam strikes a balance between pacifism and war for the sake of collective security. If, on the basis of Auden's poem, students are taught only the undesirability of military campaigns, and then from other sources they come to know about the fact that Islam permits war, for instance, for defensive reasons and under strict conditions, there is a possibility that they will be confused or have an imprecise notion about the religion. While appreciating the poem as a wonderful literary piece that exposes the hypocrisy, deceit and false promises of the unscrupulous political leaders and warmongers, students should also be informed about the importance of war when it is necessitated by reasons for restorative justice. Such a pedagogical approach to the poem in the literature classroom will preempt many pitfalls of possible wrong understanding about Islam's permission to go to war when necessary. Needless to say, such an approach will enable the students to appreciate literary works better.

Conclusion

There are scholars even in the West who are opposed to indirect Western cultural domination through education. The British Nobel laureate in literature, Doris Lessing (1919–2013), was a high school dropout and ceased to receive formal education when she was only 14. So she was mainly self-educated for the rest of her life. When asked if she was regretful or sorry, or even had second thoughts about not receiving formal education at the university level, she said:

But I'm glad that I was not educated in literature and history and philosophy, which means that I did not have

this Euro-centered 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.²⁶

Obviously, Lessing categorizes (English) literature as one of the Euro-centric subjects that are used as means to develop a complex, imperial structure of power relations. These fields of studies are used as cultural tools for imparting Western knowledge and cultural attributes through a Western tongue (English) and thus for constructing an intricate relationship between the dominant West and the marginalized rest. This is materialized through a hegemonic understanding of the world in the lens of the 'we-they' dichotomy and manipulating the knowledge system. Perhaps because of this Foucauldian nexus between knowledge and power, Lessing seems to have no regret for her apparent lack of institutional education. There is a good reason why she specifically mentions (English) literature history and philosophy in her denigration of the colonial hangover which has been explained in the preceding paragraph.

By way of providing these few examples of looking at twentieth-century English literary pieces from Islamic perspectives, we have established the need and urgency of such an intellectual undertaking. While many literary scholars may agree with such a novel way of reading and interpreting English literary works, there may be others who would be opposed to such an academic and critical practice. The more usual excuse for keeping Islamic teachings or any other religious or moral doctrines away from literary discussion is that literary works are value-neutral and should be judged by that standard alone. Such a utopian and idealistic notion of literature tends to ignore the ideological politics involved in the subject.

In the context of the literature curriculum in Britain, there have always been debates on the introduction of English literature and on the selection of literary pieces. This is because English literature is

²⁶ Qtd. in Lesley Hazelton, "Doris Lessing on Feminism, Communism, and 'Space Fiction,'" *New York Times*, July 25, 1982. Accessed on July 3, 2015 from <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/01/10/specials/lessing-space.html>>.

not considered divorced from cultural, social, ideological and even power politics. As Kress states: “The question of what criteria enter into the definition of aesthetic value is, for me, a social matter – that is, a question of the operation of power over long periods, which has become mystified as the a-historical, a-social, non-power-laden category of taste.”²⁷ Since literary pieces carry the values of their authors, it is important that lecturers inform students about other, alternative ideas and values along with discussing the worldviews contained in the texts. Since English literature is saturated with values, beliefs and worldviews of its producers, if students are not informed about the Islamic values, beliefs and worldviews, they will be left in an uncertain zone, confused or misguided.

Educational policy makers even in Britain do not rule out the inherent worth of English literary pieces to pass certain values down to future generations. As a reputed British education policy maker Brian Cox explains pertaining to English literature at British schools: “Control of the National Curriculum can lead to control of the way children think. A national curriculum in English influences attitudes to class and race.”²⁸ Thus, it is obvious that literature carries certain values and a government introduces particular texts to promote those ideas which satisfy certain desires. It is certainly because of this inherent value of literary pieces as carriers of ideas and articulators of worldviews, the great literary critic Syed Ali Ashraf states: “When the writer tries to propagate a philosophy, he should be criticized from the extra-literary point of view, which is the point of view of a thinker.”²⁹ In other words, a litterateur should be assessed for both the aesthetic values of their works and for the thoughts and ideas that they disseminate through their works. So practitioners of English literary works may applaud the literary worth of particular pieces, but, at the same time, they also need to critically evaluate the ideas and philosophies that writers propagate by using their artistic forte in various artistic forms of literature. Such an approach is more relevant

²⁷ Gunther Kress, “An English Curriculum for the Future 1,” *Changing English* 1.2 (1994): 35.

²⁸ Brian Cox, *Cox on the Battle for the English Curriculum*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995), 23.

²⁹ Ali Ashraf, *Islamic Principles...*, 56.

to English literary texts of the twentieth century which was the breeding ground for a plethora of ideas, beliefs, philosophies and worldviews.