

The Influence of Islam on English and American Literature of the 20th Century

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Abstract. *Important moral and philosophical framework of the English literature and some important twentieth-century English writers and their ideas from Islamic perspectives have been assessed. Such an approach to English literature is vital for establishing its relevance to Muslim societies and is in line with postcolonial perspectives on the subject. It is intended to suggest an alternative (Islamic) way of looking at English writers and their works, especially considering the cultural realities of Muslim settings.*

Key words: *English writers, English literature, The influence of Islam, Islamic, Muslim, Muslim societies.*

Introduction. Among the humanities and social sciences, English literature is perhaps the most contentious subject as it carries subtle ideological and cultural impacts and significances. In its introduction as a subject of study in British India and elsewhere, the most prominent consideration was its inherent worth as a carrier of Western 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. Therefore, it is important to evaluate critically English literary texts taught especially in Muslim settings and to bring in Islamic perspectives in pedagogical practices. Even though there is a strong commonality between Islam and literature in terms of the central focus on the welfare of humanity, there is one fundamental difference between them. The message of Islam is based on infallible revelation from God, while the literature produced by human beings is intrinsically characterised by the traits of the author, which could include negative qualities such as frailty and arrogance in addition to other shortcomings and limitations. Therefore, while Muslims can accept the bulk of authentic Islamic teachings, caution is needed to discriminate between what is useful and what is not when evaluating ideas encapsulated in literary works. Hence, it is important for the Muslim practitioners of English literature to analyse ideas and worldviews expressed therein in the light of the flawless divine blueprint of Islamic teachings.

Methodology. It will be a useful reference material for those who teach and study twentieth century English literature, as they will find the concrete relevance of Islam to the issues discussed in the selected works of the major authors of this literary period. I have shown this by looking at Joseph Conrad (1857 – 1924), Rudyard Kipling (1865 – 1936), Virginia Woolf (1882 – 1941), T. S. Eliot (1888 – 1965), W. H. Auden (1907 – 1973) and Doris Lessing (1919 – 2013) from Islamic perspectives. It is perhaps worth mentioning in this regard that, twentieth-century English literature is an ideological battleground which enormously influences readers of English literature including those from Muslim backgrounds. Therefore, addressing this literary tradition from Islamic perspectives may bring much good for Muslims studying English literature around the world.

T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* “paints a picture of a barren Western world of sexual and regenerative incapacity” (Childs, 1999: 75). In order to protect

Western societies from the ominous consequences of irreligiosity, sexually permissive attitudes and subsequent loss of conventional moral values, Eliot “turns to Eastern religion, to the Hindu philosophy of the Vedas, for his final Sanskrit pronouncements of Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata: give, sympathise, control” (Childs, 1999: 75). Eliot arguably recognises the need for the Western world to look East in search of alternative worldviews and philosophies to address the European crisis. The correct and comprehensive panacea for the growing ideological bankruptcy in Europe perhaps lies in the teachings of Islam. The discussion in this book on some selected British writers and their ideas will shed light on how Islam can potentially provide the right direction in terms of addressing the issues in twentieth-century English literature.

Results. One great social change in twentieth-century Britain concerns the position of women. In pre-Victorian and Victorian England, there was growing consciousness-raising with regard to women’s issues and their experience in life. Pre-Victorian writers such as Aphra Behn (1640 – 1689), Margaret Cavendish (1623 – 1673), Mary Astell (1666 – 1731), Catharine Macaulay (1731 – 1791), Mary Wollstonecraft (1759 – 1797), Jane Austen (1775 – 1817) and many more championed women’s emancipation and their right to education, employment and other opportunities and male entitlements. That was a highly commendable move by these feminist writers, as their writings set the foundation for future feminist thought and activism. Feminist activists such as Frances Power Cobbe (1822 – 1904), Barbara Bodichon (1827 – 1891) and Helen Taylor (1831–1907) fiercely campaigned for women’s rights. However, in a true sense, not many significant social changes for the amelioration of women’s condition happened in the Victorian period. Women’s equal educational, economic and political rights in a real sense started to materialise in the twentieth century.

In the new literary tradition of Britain, especially from the late twentieth century, gradually the Muslim experience has become a dominant theme. Writers of both Muslim and non-Muslim backgrounds have brought in various debates about Islam and Muslims. As a result, debates on various issues concerning Muslims have featured quite prominent, especially in postcolonial British literature. Thus, in twenty-first century British literature, Islam has become more directly relevant to the literary discussion. The changes that twentieth-century Britain saw are not all indiscriminately bad. Many of the developments concerning women’s rights – such as equal access to educational opportunities, the right to vote, and equal pay for equal work – are undoubtedly praiseworthy and are endorsed by Islam. However, many philosophical and secular positions, as well as lifestyle patterns that writers adopted and promoted through their works, need to be studied in the light of Islamic teachings so that Muslim learners and practitioners of twentieth-century English literature can look at them from their religious and cultural perspectives.

Analysis. Islam has its unique features and distinctive characteristics and perspectives on the various issues described in a myriad of twentieth century British literary texts.

JOSEPH Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and Rudyard Kipling’s “The White Man’s Burden” (1899) are heavily dominated by the theme of colonialism. Hence, it is perhaps pertinent to discuss here Britain’s colonial expansion and its implication for the colonised. Politically, Britain enjoyed the height of its imperialist expansion in the twentieth century. In spite of the moral and material decline, Islam continues to be the only reality in the Muslim world that has the charisma to attract the masses, unite them in spite of their great diversity, and motivate them to act righteously. This is because the Islamic worldview is based on a number of concepts that strike at the roots of secularism, value-neutrality, materialism and social Darwinism. It gives primary importance to moral values, human brotherhood, socio-economic justice and family solidarity and does not rely primarily on either the state or the market for realising its vision. It does not divide life into separate unrelated compartments but rather takes a comprehensive view and relies on the integrated roles of values and institutions, market, families, society, and the state, to ensure the realisation of its vision of ensuring socioeconomic justice and the well-being of all.

Thus, the Islamic worldview is diametrically opposed to the colonialist worldview of binaries. It is derived from the revelation that God gave to the last Prophet Muhammad as He did to all other prophets before him. The primordial message of revelation is justice in all its forms and manifestations. Islam demands that all human activities – private or public – be conducted according

to the requirements of justice. Accordingly, as understood through anecdotes involving Pharaoh in the Qur'an, Islam does not approve of colonialist exploitation of dehumanising and subjugating peoples of other lands and countries.

Discussion. English literary texts that advance colonialist reasoning and champion colonialist propagandas are predicated upon the philosophy of material aggrandizement and ruthless accumulation of wealth without any considerations of justice or ethical validity. They disregard the divine standard that was supposed to formulate the worldview of human beings and guide human life. Such authors have literary mastery or creative flair to represent their obnoxious ideas artistically and use a sugar-coating of the real motive with aesthetic décor, but in the sight of God, they are ignorant and devoid of any sense of accountability to God. As the Qur'an states: "... most people do not know. They know the outward of this world's life, but of the hereafter they are absolutely heedless" (Qur'an, 30: 6-7). Being heedful of the hereafter means having a sense of accountability to God. A writer with a sense of accountability to God would seek His pleasure in all creative vocations and use their literary talents to serve humanity with humility and justice. Writers of colonialist mentality may have literary flair and eloquence which they employ to spread wrong ideas, but according to the Qur'an, they are losers. It says: "Say: Shall We inform you of the greatest losers in (their) deeds? (These are) they whose labour is misdirected and lost in worldly life, even though they think that they are doing well in work" (Qur'an, 18: 103-04).

While handling 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 summarily 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 recognise 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 exclusion, discrimination and atrocities against fellow human beings has no place in Islam. The religion declares time and again that all human beings have been originated from a single entity. In one place, the Qur'an says:

O humankind! 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 recognises between human beings is dependent on the content of their character and their action. In other words, those who are God-consciousness and possess commendable character are superior to those who are not. The Qur'an states:

O people! Indeed, 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. Certainly, 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, indeed, there are messages indeed for all who are in possession of knowledge! (Qur'an, 30: 22)

While the Qur'an recognises 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 of creation is described as 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 hajj (pilgrimage). He unequivocally stated during the sermon of his last hajj:

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. (“The Last Sermon”)

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.

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

obsessive political belief that Europeans were superior in their intellect, ethnicity, race, colour and human configuration than the other people of the globe” (Khawaja, 2012). 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 absolutely opposed to the exploitative colonial measures. While teaching such literary texts, lecturers of English literature – especially those coming from a Muslim background – can touch on these issues and quote from the primary sources of Islam in order to discuss its stance on race relations.

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