

English Literary Studies: An Islamic Perspective and Method

On January 15, 2014, Md. Mahmudul Hasan, assistant professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at the International Islamic University Malaysia, addressed an audience at the IIIT headquarters in Herndon, VA. He spoke on how Muslims have tended to associate English studies with western value systems, secularism, and anti-Islamic practices.

He opened his talk with some background information. He was educated at a madrassa and then chose to study western (English) literature, much to his father's disappointment – he firmly believed that his son, whom he had always envisaged as an Islamic scholar, would come out of the university as a secularist, an atheist, or an agnostic. Although this may not be the case today, at his father's time people could actually see their university-enrolled children undergo some changes or adopt the various western lifestyles uncritically at the expense of their traditional Islamic upbringing.

Reflecting further on the context that had given rise to this attitude, Hasan pointed out the tendency at that time, and based solidly upon the Subcontinent's colonial experience, to associate English literature studies with both colonialism and western Christendom. In response to this, contemporary scholars of postcolonial studies employ the twin strategies of abrogation and appropriation to dismantle the original intent behind introducing English literary studies and, simultaneously, to create platforms of self-assertion and resistance. Those who support the Islamization of English literary studies propose a similar approach to English literature in order to counterbalance the un-Islamic cultural influences as well as to present the Islamic worldviews in relation to the life-worlds that these literary texts are reputed to promote.

He said that many Muslims find it difficult to reconcile "Islam" and "English literature," for how can there be any relationship between them? This is not as illogical as it may seem, however, for the British introduced English literature into the Subcontinent long before they introduced it into the United Kingdom itself. It was offered in the former in 1830, but only ninety years later in the latter. In fact, according to Hasan, the subject itself has a colonial background, for it, along with Christian missionary activity, was designed to further colonialism. This "literary" approach allowed the colonialists to sidestep an issue that was of primary importance to the missionaries: presenting

their message in the context of the larger Christian moral message based on mercy and love. In other words, the colonialists focused on English literature and could thus ignore all moral questions.

This position was made quite clear by Thomas Babington Macaulay, who served on the Supreme Council of India between 1834 and 1838. Macaulay convinced the governor-general to teach all courses in English beginning with the sixth year of schooling on the grounds that the traditional indigenous languages of instruction could not deal with modern history, science, and technology. He is even quoted as 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.

English literature remains a popular topic in South Asia. At present, more students in Bangladesh study this topic than in the United States. India has more students in this field than in all English-speaking countries combined. One reason for this phenomenon is that it helps indigenous college graduates get good government jobs. However, it also deracinates them from the local culture and makes them want to become British. Thus they establish a culture of mimicry. There are, therefore, certain underlying notions associated with this academic path, such as “you study this subject and you are already one of them.” He referred to Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1952), which discusses the impact of certain words and images on issues related to race and color.

He concluded his presentation by offering several ideas on how to teach English literature. They are as follows:

1. *Molding self and others with Islamic values.* Muslim instructors should embrace the Islamization of teaching, both as a transmitter of knowledge and as a role model. They need to study what and how the Prophet taught. They should, according to Hasan, stress the purification of the heart and reflect this in all of the subjects that they teach. One part of such an education should be how to deal with moral and other crises. He cited Harry Lewis, a Harvard professor for more than thirty years and dean of Harvard College (1995-2003), who drew upon his own experiences to explain how great American universities – among them Harvard – have abandoned their mission. The result of his reflections can be found in Lewis’ *Excellence Without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2006), a devastating analysis of how the traditional *raison d’être* of universities has been forgotten in the fierce competition

to hire the best professors and increase the institution's financial endowment. The result is the adoption of a consumer model of education that does not prepare students to become responsible members of society.

2. *Islamizing literary texts by finding and examining them according to Islamic teachings and values.* Many western literary texts do not agree with Islamic values, such as carpe diem poetry, and thus need to be examined according to the Islamic view so that students will not be led astray. What he would like to see is a bridge between the literature and the religious tradition, not a tendency toward more apologetic material.
3. *Reforming the curriculum.* This issue is quite important, for the original syllabus was designed to further colonialism and remains pretty much intact. Why, he wondered, are only the old-time British writers studied? What about the British novelist Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall (d. 1936), the British poet Martin Lings (d. 2005), and other British authors who happen to be Muslim?

Moderator Ermin Sinanovic (research director, IIIT) remarked that IIIT's Islamization of Knowledge project is concerned with educating Muslim youth and is relevant to the institute's overall program of reforming higher education. A major issue here is how to bring the existing curriculum more into line with Muslim civilization. One approach is censorship; another one is to look at the material with a critical eye and determine where it differs from Islamic norms.

During the ensuing question-and-answer period, various audience members offered their own ideas. These can be summarized as (1) all teachers, regardless of religious affiliation, should look for wisdom in all texts because this is the only way to really understand another culture; (2) all teachers should ask their students not to view "a story as just a story" or consider "art for art's sake" alone, but explain to them how to look for and detect the underlying messages and deeper meanings; (3) given that all religions have similar core values, pointing these out and promoting them will help bring students from different religious and other backgrounds closer together; (4) traditional canons should be widened, for different perspectives only enhance, as opposed to restrict, critical thinking. In addition, this is a good way to avoid the danger of group think; and (5) one has to be aware of the grip that British and French literature and culture still have on Muslim societies. This can be seen in the fact that before one can speak with "authority" on either civilization in order to criticize it, he/she has to have fully mastered its core elements.

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