


Volume 15, No. 3  2018

JOURNAL OF

Islam in Asia

A Refereed International Biannual Arabic – English Journal

**Special Issue: Integration of Islamic
Revealed Knowledge into Humanities
and Social Sciences**

INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA

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JOURNAL OF *Islam in Asia*

Volume 15, No. 3. 2018

ISSN: 1823-0970 E-ISSN: 2289-8077

Journal of Islam in Asia

Special Issue: Integration of Islamic Revealed Knowledge
into Humanities and Social Sciences 2018

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The Study of English Literature* from Tawhidic Perspective

Pengajian Sastra Inggeris Menurut Perspektif Tawhid

Aimillia Mohd Ramli **

Abstract

The prominence of English literature in literary studies has made it an important part of the discourse surrounding Islamisation of Knowledge (IOK). Because of his involvement in this movement, Syed Ali Ashraf's (1925-1998) argument that English literature contained "intuitive truths" that transcended religious boundaries has been widely adopted as an approach in the study of literature, which is defined here as a written body of works dealing with artistic expressions, from an Islamic perspective. This paper argues, however, that his insistence on normative morality and spirituality in English literature as both providing guidance for human behavior and a basis for literary criticism is problematic. Part of the problem is the widely-held notion that literature, in general, only functions as the medium for the propagation and development of values and cultural refinement. Syed Naquib al-Attas's (1931 – present) concept of Islamisation, however, places *adabiyāt* or literature in its proper relation to *adab* or proper behaviour and etiquette that locates Allah at the highest place in the order of existence. Following Al-Attas, the author argues that the study of English literature should then be conducted through a comparative approach of both English and Islamic literatures that privileges not only the Islamic understanding of values but also leads to the acknowledgement and worship of Allah.

* This paper was first presented at the First World Congress on Integration and Islamisation of Human Knowledge (FWCII-2013) as "Constructing the Alternative Paradigm of *Tawhid*," Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 23 – 25 August 2013.

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Keywords: Islamisation of Knowledge, English Literature, Comparative Literature, Literary Criticism.

Abstrak

Keutamaan sastra Inggeris dalam pengajian kesusasteraan telah menjadikannya satu subjek penting dalam wacana berkaitan Islamisasi Ilmu Pengetahuan (IOK). Kerana penglibatan beliau dalam pergerakan ini, pendapat Syed Ali Ashraf (1925-1998) bahawa sastra Inggeris mengandungi "kebenaran intuitif" yang menjangkai sempadan agama telah diterima sebagai perspektif Islam buat kajian sastra, yang boleh disimpulkan sebagai hasil-hasil karya yang berkaitan dengan ekspresi artistik. Walaubagaimanapun, penulis berpendapat bahawa kepentingan yang diberikan of Syed Ali Ashraf kepada moral dan kerohanian normatif dalam sastra Inggeris sebagai panduan untuk tingkah laku manusia dan asas kritikan sastra akan menimbulkan berbagai masalah. Sebahagian daripada masalah ini adalah tanggapan bahawa sastra, secara umumnya, hanya berfungsi sebagai medium untuk penyebaran dan pembangunan nilai-nilai dan perkembangan budaya. Konsep Islamisasi Syed Naquib al-Attas (1931-), bagaimanapun, menempatkan adabiyat atau sastra dalam konteks hubungannya dengan adab atau tingkahlaku dan tatasusila yang meletakkan Allah di tempat tertinggi dalam urutan kewujudan. Seperti Al-Attas, penulis berpendapat bahawa kajian kesusasteraan Inggeris harus dilakukan melalui pendekatan komparatif di antara sastra Inggeris dan sastra Islam yang bukan sahaja menitikberatkan pemahaman Islam mengenai nilai-nilai murni tetapi juga mengagungkan Allah.

Kata Kunci: Islamisasi Pengetahuan, Kesusasteraan Inggeris, Kesusasteraan Perbandingan, Kritikan Sastra.

Background

At the end of the First World Conference on Muslim Education held in Mecca in 1977, it was obvious that the study of English literature, which is defined here as a written body of works dealing with artistic expressions in English, was one area that was seen as significant to the discourse on Islamic education. The organizing secretary of the conference was the late Syed Ali Ashraf (1925-1998) who, until the end of his life, championed the importance of cultivating the Islamic faith in students through education, in general, and the study of English literature, in particular. He wrote and published many essays and books to support this objective. Through his works he defines the role that education, particularly English literary studies, plays in fulfilling the Islamic concept of man as vicegerent [*khalifah*] of Allah (s.w.t.).¹ Although, he argues, literary education is an "Acquired Knowledge," it is similar to "Revealed

¹ Syed Ali Ashraf, "Literary Education and Religious Values: An Islamic Approach," in *Religion and Education: Islamic and Christian Approaches*, ed. Syed Ali Ashraf and Paul H. Hirst (Cambridge, U.K.: The Islamic Academy, 1994), 60-75.

Knowledge” in that it “depends mainly on the intuitive realization of some truths about life which the imagination of the author seizes and turns into a poem or a novel or a drama.”² This “intuitive realization,” he writes, comes from an internal source of insight and Syed Ali does not differentiate between Muslim and non-Muslim writers as well as philosophers as those who have had some experiences with this transcendental realization at a deeply personal level. The challenge for literary writers and, correspondingly, critics, he believes, is to find symbols from the external world to represent “the Truth” that he or she has realized. He argues that this task is made difficult because of the emphasis given to modern science in today’s world. Science, he says, portrays nature as a process that is constantly undergoing changes. To counter this, he provides some teaching strategies to assist both educators and students in the process of finding symbols from the external world to represent this “Truth” and these are namely the teaching of English literary forms and the cultivation of critical appreciation for a certain literary work. Both are supposed to create the necessary skills and sentiments to produce an intuitive realisation in the minds of both teachers and students that will allow them to comprehend the meaning of the English literary text they are studying. If the resulting message of a text indirectly contravenes with man’s moral and spiritual experiences, the teacher should indicate the limitations of the particular work. To achieve this aim, Syed Ali argues, the teacher himself or herself should imbibe an Islamic norm of life.³ Syed Ali makes further suggestions on the criteria of a good literature by arguing that it should convey the universalism of values and not the personal philosophical outlook of a singular writer or poet.⁴ A writer, according to Syed Ali, should accept “the normal natural moral philosophy which is common to all important religions of the world and try to realize human life through that norm.”⁵

Muslims, however, should find Syed Ali’s insistence on normative morality and spirituality as both providing a guide for human behavior and a basis for literary criticism problematic. While he performs a commendable task of returning to the religious and moral foundations of English literature, which in England, were laid out by men like Adam

² Syed Ali, “Literary Education and Religious Values”, 65.

³ Ibid., pg. 72.

⁴ Syed Ali Ashraf. “The Disciplined Muse or the Muse Licentious?” in *Crisis in Muslim Education*, ed. Syed Sajjad Husain and Syed Ali Ashraf. (King Abdul Aziz University, Jeddah: Hooder and Stoughton, 1979), 92-103.

⁵ Syed Ali Ashraf. “The Disciplined Muse or the Muse Licentious?”, 94.

Smith (1723-1790) and Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), his attention to English literature as exemplifying the highest form of literariness ever known to man as well as his emphasis on a normative construct of morality are troubling. According to him, the “Truth,” as derived merely from intuitive realizations by Muslim and non-Muslim writers, does not seem to depend on *al-Dīn* or Islam. In addition, symbols that the literary writers use to allude to “this Truth” could, he said, be found in the external world, and not in the Quran or *Hadith*. That English writers have used the Bible as an important source from which to mine their treasure trove of imageries is a fact that Syed Ali had simply left out of his paper. Furthermore, he was apparently oblivious to the incongruities between the multiculturalist idea of normative morality and an Islamic norm of life which relies on the Oneness of Allah (s.w.t.) or *Tawhid*. The American literary critic Ihab Hassan, however, was right when he argues that the multiculturalist approach to the study of literature is not only unrealistic, it is also devoid of any representational power or political agency since it is not linked to a certain culture or system of belief. As he says,

*Or is it sufficient to adopt Edward Said’s dictum, that the role of the intellectual is “to speak the truth to power”? Whose truth would that be, and whose morality, and who might enforce it? Hindu, Judaic, Buddhist, Shinto, Confucian, Christian or Islamic morality?*⁶

What Ihab Hassan points out is that values are culture-bound and, more importantly, for Muslims, that the emphasis on values in literature has had its origins in a Western rejection of religion.

What was strikingly clear was that by the nineteenth century, the period associated most with the affordability and popularity of literary works amongst the masses in England, the number of people who believed in Christianity was declining rapidly as it was “no longer winning the heart of the masses.”⁷ Literature was seen as a replacement for religion as it was thought to contain moral messages and lessons as well as having the capacity to develop empathy amongst its readers as they read into the fictional characters’ minds and thoughts. This was what Adam Smith (1723-1790), the moral philosopher and political economist, had in mind when he introduced the study of English literature in his course on

⁶ Ihab Hassan, “Queries for Postcolonial Studies,” *Philosophy and Literature* 22: 2 (Oct. 1998): 332.

⁷ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1983]1996): 20.

rhetoric and *belles lettres* at Edinburgh University in the eighteenth century. It was supposed to assist the creation of an uncorrupted and civilized society by cajoling its members to “read” into the lives of others and as a result would become less self-centered.⁸

Today many academicians in departments of English in Muslim countries, including Malaysia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and many others, have chosen to ignore the religious vacuum that had given rise to the secular lessons and values in English literature.⁹ These imply their failure in a number of things: Failure to consider the Muslim *ummah*’s steadfastness to religion; obliviousness to Islam’s unique values; and, finally, inability to abandon the mistaken assumption that values are naturally normative. Addressing this issue, an early critic of Islamic literature in Malaysia Muhammad Kamal Hassan makes an important suggestion that Muslims should never view and interpret literatures written by non-Muslims, no matter how they appear to subscribe to a normative morality, by using a liberal humanistic model.¹⁰ That Islam’s value system is composed of Muslims’ divinely-ordained responsibilities as servants of Allah (s.w.t.) should be made clear to any student of English literature. This situation is in a direct contrast to the West with its recognition that values, in a secular and often God-less world, are uncertain and unclear, and this, in the study of literature, had gradually brought about the advent of literary theory.

The moral-based approach that Syed Ali had taken in the 1970s in his study of English literature, however, was, fast losing its footing in the study of English literature in the West. Looking back, the man who had used and introduced this moral approach was F.R. Leavis (1895-1978), a major figure in the New Criticism movement. Not only did he emphasize that values are present in a formal study of English literature but that they also must be viewed as independent from religious and cultural contexts. More importantly, he enshrines them as representing “the Truth.” Nonetheless, he argues, the nature of “this Truth” cannot be elucidated clearly

⁸ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Ed. D.D. Raphael & A.L. Macfie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1759] 1976): 9.

⁹ For more information, see Aimillia Mohd Ramli, “Decolonising the Study of English Literature in a Muslim-Malaysian Context: An Argument for a Spiritual-Based Comparative Paradigm”, *Cultura: Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology* 10:1 (2013).

¹⁰ Muhammad Kamal Hassan, *Beberapa Catatan Mengenai Kriteria Estetika Dalam Seni dan Sastera* [Notes on aesthetical criteria in fine arts and literature], *Dewan Sastera* 12:2 (1982): 23-4.

or be seen as dependent on philosophy. According to him, a literary critic must be able to deduce values from a literary work without relying on any other theory or philosophy because “a certain valuing is implicit in the realizing.”¹¹ Although Leavis was successful in advocating his way of studying literature, the morally ambiguous nature of his instructions created a need in later decades to turn the nature of this field of enquiry into a more scientific one by introducing a range of theories based on the cultural theories that had gained prominence from the 1950s onwards. By the 1970s, the study of literature in the West had gradually left the realm of moral concerns and entered the vast arena of philosophies of social sciences, the attendant of which comes literary theories. Today, these theories are applied by those who criticize or analyze works in English literature.

Yet this emphasis on materialist theories, Muhammad Kamal Hassan argues, has resulted in the spiritual crisis currently experienced in the West. As he continues, “While it provides us with ways to analyze external objects, it has failed to provide us with a technique to integrate the spirit with the body; the absolute with the transient; ... Islam with the World”.¹² A literary theory for Muslims, according to Muhammad Kamal, would be one that manages to provide a balance between Islamic spiritual and materialistic concerns by integrating them in a harmonious way so that it has both social and political roles to play in a human being’s overall development.

Recent inroads into Western literary criticism also show an increasing fascination with morality and spirituality and their connections to the material and the role that these could play in generating creativity in the sciences as well as in the liberal arts. Ihab Hassan, the renowned postmodernist theorist, speaks of spirituality in relation to literature, specifically postcolonial literature,

Spirit does not exhaust itself in theological doctrines and religious orthodoxies. It reveals itself in a vast range of immaterial facts: in common intuitions and quotidian beliefs; in sentiments like love, values, like loyalty; in the sense of beauty, awe, ecstasy, the sublime; in the enigmas of the creative process in science and art; in visionary and

¹¹ F. R. Leavis, *The Common Pursuit* (London: Peregrine Books, 1966): 213.

¹²Muhammad Kamal Hassan, “Menghayati Islam Dalam Mempelajari dan Mengembangkan Ilmu [Appreciation for Islam’s role in the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge],” *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 3, (1985):15.

*mystical experiences — above all, perhaps, in intimations, if not of immortality, of a larger reality of the cosmos, beyond our grasp. All these “immaterial facts”...constitute the radical impulse both to realize and to transcend one’s humanity.*¹³

Unlike moral codes, which have been shown to be culture-bound, the spirit, Ihab Hassan argues, is a human attribute which transcends all boundaries, including those of cultures and religions. Surely, it would seem that humane attributes and concepts, like love, imagination, intuition and etc., exist in any human society and as such could be converging points for the study of their manifestations in different cultures, particularly Western and Muslim cultures. What Ihab has overlooked, however, is that in their discursive acts of explaining these concepts to their hearers, philosophers throughout the ages have rightly viewed them as inseparable from cultural theories and ideologies, including those of organized religions. Indeed, discourse on the human spirit could never be, for the Westerner, devoid of cultural antecedents such as Christianity or the various-isms that had been popular in the West. Likewise, the spirit for Muslims writers and poets should be one that derives from the Oneness of Allah or *Tawhid* and worldview or *tassawur*.

An emphasis on reading literature by focussing on the spirit is one that has not been fully explored by Muslim critics. Early works in conceptualizing the nature of Islamic literature, which is defined here as a written body of works dealing with artistic expressions by Muslim writers, for example, focus on judging and interpreting a literary work based on obscure concepts that are aligned cursorily to Islamic teachings. If a work of Islamic literature were to be analysed satisfactorily and acquire the agency to promote Islam, concepts must have strong spiritual dimensions and these need to be explored scientifically. The works of Muslim philosophers who have couched their concepts on the spirit in scientific terms, such as Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas and Muhammad Iqbal, could be the foundation of a Western-Islamic comparative paradigm for the study of English literature.

The most noticeable issue in introductions in books as well as discourse on Islamic literature is the emphasis that these placed on subduing the interpretation or meaning of a certain work to Islamic teachings. To the World Organization of Islamic Literature, the objective of

¹³ Ihab Hassan, “Queries for Postcolonial Studies,” *Philosophy and Literature* 22: 2 (Oct. 1998): 340-1.

artistic expressions about life and the universe must be in accordance with Islamic aspirations. To the Muslim thinker Muhammad Qutb (1919-2014), for example, Islamic literature should be regarded as beautiful expressions of the universe, life and man that correspond to the Islamic worldview or *tassawur*.¹⁴ While these support the importance of the Islamic worldview or *tassawur* to literature, it seems that the current discourse on Islamic literature focusses more on aestheticism as critics align beautiful literary expressions with Islamic teachings, aspirations and values.

The situation above is reflective of the limitations that the word *adabiyāt*, which can be translated as a written body of works dealing with artistic expressions, has endured. An extension of the word *adab*, which can be translated as proper behavior and etiquette, it has undergone much of a contextual restriction that limits it to the concept of cultural refinement in relation to creative writings, *belle letters* and social etiquette. Al-Attas, however, elucidates the proper context and understanding of literature by going back to the original meaning of *adab*.

In the original sense a basic adab is the inviting to a banquet. The idea of a banquet implies that the host is a man of honor and prestige, and that many people are present; that the people who are present are those who, in the host's estimation are deserving of the honor of invitation, and that therefore people of refined qualities and upbringing who are expected to behave as befits their station in speech, conduct and etiquette.... The islamization of this basic concept of adab as an invitation to a banquet, together with a conceptual implication inherent in it, is profoundly expressed in a hadith narrated by Ibn Mas'ūd, where the Holy Quran is itself is described as God's invitation to a banquet on earth, in which we are exhorted to partake of it by means of acquiring real knowledge of it.... The Holy Quran is God's invitation to a spiritual banquet, and the acquiring of knowledge of it is partaking of the fine food in it.¹⁵

¹⁴Muhammad Qutb, *Manhaj al-Fan al-Islami [The method of Islamic art]* (Beirut: Dar al-Shuruq, 1983): 6.

¹⁵ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education*. (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1999): 24.

The knowledge that Allah (s.w.t.) is offering to a learner must be acquired with proper behaviour and etiquette so that she or he may fully derive its benefits. As al-Attas writes,

*adab involves action to discipline the mind and soul; it is acquisition of the good qualities and attributes of mind and soul; it is to perform the correct as against the erroneous action, of right or proper against the wrong; it is preserving from disgrace. Thus adab as the disciplinary action, the selective acquisition, the correct performance and the qualitative preservation, together with the knowledge that they involve, constitutes the actualization of knowledge.*¹⁶

Likewise, al-Attas views the concept of *adab* as the most comprehensive concept for knowledge that is disseminated and instilled in the student's self through *ta'adib*, which can be translated as education, "Thus, we defined education, including the educational process as the recognition and acknowledgement, progressively instilled in man, the proper places of things in the order of creation, such as that it leads to the acknowledgement of the proper place of God in the order of being and existence".¹⁷

The connection between knowledge or *adab* and *adabiyāt*, as both constitute *ta'dīb*, should situate the latter as having a significant role in the propagation of The Oneness of Allah [*Tawhid*] (s.w.t.). Going back to the history of literature, and, more specifically, poetry, this has mainly been the justification used by many poets to earn societal respect and honour for their art. Al-Attas observes that poets living before the advent of philosophy, in both pre-Islamic and Western traditions, alleviated the nature and function of their poetry by claiming the Divine as the source of their poetical inspiration. In the West, al-Attas points out, the Greek philosophers, the most famous being Plato, unseated them by arguing that literature must convey the importance of virtue, truth and observe generic requirements.¹⁸ The poets' failure to follow these rules brought their demise.

The Islamic understanding of literature and philosophy should not be viewed as being susceptible to the same problems. As al-Attas argues, both should rightly be faithful interpretations of the verses inside the

¹⁶ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam*, 25.

¹⁷ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam*, 26.

¹⁸ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Risalah untuk Kaum Muslimin [A treatise for Muslims]*. (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC): 2001): 112-3.

Quran, through proper and beautiful use of language that introduces as well as affirms the Muslim identity of the literary writer or poet.¹⁹ The appreciation for literature, hence, should not only stem from its aesthetic merits but, more importantly, the degree of its faithfulness and creative affirmation of the teachings that are embedded in the Quran. Literature, in al-Attas's concept of education, should not be divorced from its role in instilling and cultivating virtues. As al-Attas writes, "If Islamic literature is termed *adabiyyāt*, this means that its role is to convey culture and etiquette, supplying teachings as well as statements that will educate the self and society in order to inculcate these [in both], until these have elevated humankind from its lowly status to an ever-lastingly perfect condition".²⁰ To merge this definition with the term *adab* is to argue that literature's role is more than to safeguard the proper and progressive acquisition of knowledge but also to ensure that this knowledge, as al-Attas writes, "properly places things in order of creation" and, more importantly, provides "the proper place of God in the order of being and existence".²¹

In the Muslim world, it is commonly accepted that the *ulama* would shoulder this role as the carriers and teachers of *adab*. Yet, as al-Attas argues, it is possible for a poet or a literary figure to assume a similar role if he or she is able to acquire an Islamic personality. Accordingly, works by this poet or literary figure should reflect real knowledge because the source of inspiration which invokes his or her faith is also from a religious source, not from philosophy or aestheticism.²² Basing on this, the most commendable poetry or any form of creative writing would naturally come from a poet or a literary figure who is well-regarded for his religious conviction or *iman*, and not merely for his philosophy or aesthetic sense.

A study on literature, in general, should then rightly begin with clarifying these religious convictions according to the main sources of Islam, the Quran and *Hadith*, and also the understanding that philosophers have regarded these sources. The focus of an education on literature in Islam, hence, should move away from the current attention to aesthetic qualities and forms to emphasize religious concepts and beliefs as

¹⁹ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Risalah untuk Kaum Muslimin*: 117.

²⁰ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Risalah untuk Kaum Muslimin*: 121.

²¹ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam*, 26.

²² Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam*, 125.

well as ways to transform these into Islamic behaviour and attributes, with a view to inculcate them in the minds of readers.

The study of literature requires critiquing literary works, it is, like other humanistic fields, a discursive practice. Yet its discourse must be clear and precise and this requires the scientification of terminologies for concepts and beliefs that can be applied in a reading of a work of literature. While the Quran and *Hadith* remain fundamental sources, the use of Islamic philosophy in an Islamic approach to the study of literature enables a literary discourse to emerge as it is structured around scientific as well as humanistic enquiries on the nature of the human spirit. In this regard, the contributions that Muslim philosophers, such as al-Attas and Muhammad Iqbal, have made concerning metaphysical concepts from an Islamic worldview are significant. These will enable critics to construct discourses on concepts and beliefs previously indescribable either because they were thought to be too abstracts that they cannot be clearly defined or too selective to be experienced.

Al-Attas' scientific philosophy, for example, provides in-depth and discursive explorations into both human psychology and its concepts, such as intuition, as well as metaphysical concerns, like the nature of essence. Al-Attas himself had stated that the process of Islamicising education requires the scientification of Islamic terms as well as a reliance on the Quran. While he regarded the arts or creative practices as unimportant to his educational paradigm, he explains that his primary contention against the arts was that these had taken the place of scientific enquiries into Islamic practices and related philosophies.²³

While I find story-telling and reciting poems to be possible forms of man's expression of his submission to Allah (s.w.t.), al-Attas rightly points out that contributions in Islamic philosophies are often confined to mystical dimensions of Islamic poetry, particularly Sufistic literature. To counteract such tendencies to obscure and mystify concepts amongst Muslims, which are by nature complex and abstruse, al-Attas argues, Muslims philosophers should first return to the teachings of the Quran and *Hadith* and then resort to scientific discourse in order to explain Islamic epistemology or *tassawur*. The resulting findings could then benefit the study and writing of literary pieces as writers and poets are shown to express their works.²⁴ A comparative study of Western-Islamic under-

²³ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam*, 36.

²⁴ In the last few pages of *The Concept of Education*, al-Attas lists knowledge that encompasses religious knowledge as well as those of human and physical sciences and

standings of spiritual concepts could then facilitate an Islamic study of English literature by privileging the wealth of knowledge and *adab* as an Islamic inheritance, which is devoid of the shortcomings inherent in Western philosophy.

In the West, interest in philosophy in relation to literature in recent times has waned. This is primarily due to the influence that post-modernism, with its emphasis on subjectivity and multiple readings, have had on many writers. Yet fundamental philosophical questions regarding morality and science have longed been asked and debated in the West, and this was mostly encouraged by the mystery surrounding God in Christianity, a fact that was further exacerbated by the growth of secularism. Furthermore, many important and canonical literary works in English literature are by English writers who have long been regarded as philosophers in their own right. Beginning with the nineteenth century, however, accusations over being overly-emotional and melodramatic had caused these writers to distance themselves from their works. After the Second World War there was also an increasing disillusionment with overarching concepts and worldviews. The advent of postmodernism and its notion that all types of knowledge and discourse are subjective and culture-constructed instilled the idea that a writer could never be expected to disseminate ideas that is true to other people's lives and experiences. To return to a discussion on English writers and their philosophy, in this sense, is to return to a time when a writer's works were not only motivated by but also disseminated his or her philosophy.

An Islamic English education system for Muslim literary critics and writers, hence, would make use of materials in English or Western and Islamic philosophies that could be compared and contrasted within the various contexts of their treatments in English and Islamic literatures. For this purpose, it would be useful to conduct comparative studies between writers and poets who are also philosophers in their own right. This approach would allow for various opinions by Western and Muslim poet-thinkers to be assessed together within whatever knowledge on values, the spirit and society that is known, afforded and debated.

A comparative study of Romanticism and Islam, for example, could focus on the issue of poetic inspiration. One of my papers is a comparative study between imagination as a source of poetic inspiration

added to this, knowledge that come under the humanities, including literature. For more information, see Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam*, 41-42.

to the English Romantics and intuition as an important source to the Islamic poet Muhammad Iqbal. Poetic inspiration used to be an important topic in literary history because it used to show not only the connection that the poet has with the Divine in the creation of his or her poem but also the high esteem that past societies, particularly the Greeks, had for poets. Differences, however, must be clearly established between the Romantics' deification of an obscure force that they perceived as the source of their imagination and the Islamic understanding of Allah (s.w.t.) and intuition as providing an indefatigable supply of ideas to feed the Muslim poet's creative mentality. In poems by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), the Romantic understanding of imagination as one that was based on a Neoplatonic notion of this world as an imitation of a real world is turned into a recounting of the poet's theophanic visions in which the essence of a Christian god is obscurely reflected in His creations.²⁵ Nonetheless, the difficulty of differentiating this form of imagination from the poet's personal fancies is a major shortcoming of Coleridge's philosophy. Muslims, however, believe God to be a separate entity than His creations and this idea places intuition as the foremost source of poetic inspiration for Iqbal. In my discussion on Iqbal's use of intuition, I refer to al-Attas' concept of Intuition of Existence,²⁶ wherein the latter elucidates the concept of God's revelation of Himself or *tajalli* through one of His Names, otherwise known as *asmā*, or attributes, otherwise known as *sifāt* to the Muslim who has experienced this type of intuition. Many of Iqbal's poems suggest that this was the version of intuition which he had in mind as he wrote them. The pervading theme of his poems seems to be the narrators' unending quest to gain knowledge and closeness to Allah (s.w.t.). Hence, the highest form of poetic inspiration for a Muslim poet, as Iqbal has shown, is not the poet's imagination as a manifestation of God's eminence in this world but his or her unshakable knowledge of Allah's existence that results in the poet's expression of his or her desire to meet and catch glimpses of Allah (s.w.t.).²⁷

²⁵ John Beers believes that the popularity that Neoplatonism enjoyed during Coleridge's schooldays primarily owed to the writings of Thomas Taylor, namely a small volume of his work which Taylor published in 1787, entitled *Concerning the Beautiful* (1787), xiii. For more information, see John Beers *Poetic Intelligence* (London: Macmillan, 1977).

²⁶ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas. *The Intuition of Existence* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1990).

²⁷ Aimillia Mohd Ramli, "Imagination and Intuition in the Poetic Philosophies of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Muhammad Iqbal," *World Literature Studies* 8:1 (April 2016): 98-111.

Other aspects that could be compared are concepts associated with morality. This, I have written in another paper, could be a discussion on free-will.²⁸ In my paper I write how Iqbal had singled out Browning as the poet who presented the standards for morality as subjected to a human being's free-will, as opposed to the Western reliance on "determinism". Stark contrasts, I argue, exist between the two men's conception of "human choice" or free-will. This is partly because the attention to a human being's struggles with his or her own Self in order to know the world and his and her active reaction to it in Browning's poem are often bereft of any guiding principle, leading his protagonists sometimes to experience moral depravity and, at other times, disillusionment. Iqbal's concept of free-will, however, sees it as a divine gift that is to be used with balance, amongst other things, in order to serve Allah (s.w.t.). The differences between these different ways of viewing free-will could be illustrated by comparing poems by the two poets.

Leaving the poetic genre behind, lecturers could also discuss the shortcomings inherent in the Western concept of tragedy, as depicted in many plays, by analysing al-Attas's views on this matter. In *Ma'na Kebahagiaan*, which can be translated as *The meaning of happiness*,²⁹ al-Attas explains the Western concept of a "tragic" hero as one that originates from the classical Greek period in which a male hero is portrayed as obstinately holding on to the force of his own personality when facing insurmountable odds that are thrown at him by external forces. Always in the pursuit of happiness, he is constantly hoping for a miracle to happen. al-Attas, however, views happiness as an emotion that could only be experienced if a Muslim were to subject himself or herself completely to the will of Allah (s.w.t.).

A proposed Islamic study of English literature would also have to include a response to literary pieces that are embedded with Christian teachings, such as Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Here, lecturers could use a comparative religion

²⁸ See Aimillia Mohd Ramli, "Free-will as Self-Assertion: A Comparative Study of Selected Poems by Muhammad Iqbal and Robert Browning" in *Islamicisation of Knowledge and English Literary Studies: In the Age of Islamophobia and Westernophobia*, eds. Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf and Aimillia Mohd Ramli (Kuala Lumpur: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2016), 92-111.

²⁹ Al-Attas, Syed Muhammad Naquib, *Ma'na Kebahagiaan dan Pengalamannya Dalam Islam* [The meaning of happiness and experiencing it in Islam] (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 2002).

framework, which has been developed by Ismail Raji al-Faruqi to highlight differences between Islam and Christianity in matters dealing with the soul and society.³⁰ It could show that, for the most part, how Christianity emphasizes good deeds as a guarantee for salvation without any reference to God as the ultimate source to which the objectives of these deeds are directed. Islam, however, views the gaining of Allah's (s.w.t.) *ridā* or satisfactory acceptance as the objective of all virtuous acts and that the road to salvation must not only be filled with good deeds but also the perfection of man's *imān* or religious conviction as well as manifestations of these in his formal acts of worship toward Allah (s.w.t.). If a work, like John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, describes in detail the Christian view of man's creation and so forth, the many interpretations by Muslims to this work could be discussed in class.

There are also literary writings that are social commentaries regarding the time periods in which they were written. Hence, these do not address and are not concerned with the spiritual development of their readers. In such cases, these can be shown to be influenced by the literary works and cultures of the Muslim people. Works, like Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and Thomas Mallory's *Morte de'Arthur*, have long been regarded as important masterpieces in English literature because these purportedly represent the beginnings of the illustrious literary heritage of the English people. It is the job of the Muslim lecturer to challenge this assumption by demonstrating in class that these contain adaptations or borrowings from the literatures and cultures of the Muslim people. The pilgrim motif in *The Canterbury Tales*, for instance, is derived from *Disciplina Clericalis* by Petrus Alfonsi, who lived during the era of Muslim's occupation of Spain. He, in turn, relied on Islamic sources for his work, including story no. 18 of the *Disciplina* that contains the tale of a townsman and a countryman bound on a pilgrimage to Mecca and how they decided to hold a storytelling competition along the way, rewarding the winner with a piece of bread.³¹ This, as is well-known, is very similar to story of the pilgrims in Chaucer's work. Another important source for English literature written in the medieval period is *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, a set of tales that have continued to exert their influence long into the 21st century. However, it must

³⁰ Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, *Islam and Other Faiths*, edit. Ataullah Siddiqui. (Markfield, Leicester, U.K.: The Islamic Foundation and The International Institute of Islamic Thought: 1998).

³¹ Eberhard Hermes and P.R. Quarrie, trans, *The Disciplina Clericalis of Petrus Alfonsi* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1970).

be acknowledged that the nature of some of these tales is not explicitly Islamic. Hence, the lecturer must use his or her discretion in highlighting the contents of the *Nights* or any other influential literary pieces written by Muslims that appear in many works of English literature. It should be stressed here that because the subjects of these studies are not related specifically to Islamic beliefs and values, these should not constitute the bulk of materials on Islamisation of the study of English literature. Nonetheless, those seeking to include these studies into the attendant course reading materials could refer to a number of publications from Western academicians which seek to highlight the influence that Muslims have had on English literature. Works, like *Spain to England: A Comparative Study of Arabic, European, and English Literature of the Middle Ages* by Alice E. Laster, Abdul Wahid Lu'lu'a's *The Contributions of the Spanish Muslims to the European Poetry* and Masooudul Hassan's *Sufism and English Literature*, show the influence that Islam and literary works written by Muslims have had on European literature, including English literature.

Even though the suggestions offered above should be useful in offering an alternative way for the Muslim academician to teach English literature to students, the continuation and growth of a body of works in studies on English literature still depends largely on new discourses on the spirit that the social sciences need to develop. Fields, like psychology and sociology, must be able to explore and offer new philosophic conceptions of the spirit, which could then be related to society, and, consequently, be applied to comparative studies of Western and Islamic literature. Possible topics of interest could be on the nature of loyalty, peace, courage and so forth. The ways in which these are conceptualized in Islamic terms could be the results of joint studies from the study of theology, or more specifically, *Usul-ul-Din*, and the social sciences as mentioned above. The department of Arabic languages could also make an immense contribution in Islamization as a study of the Arabic language from the linguistic point-of view, as al-Attas has shown through his works, could generate whole new discourses for the Islamisation project. The basic point here is that academicians need to be less concerned with their own specific field of inquiry and work together to formulate and produce comprehensive and multidisciplinary discourses on a range of issues that cover the spirit and its relation to society.

Conclusion

A proposed study of English from an Islamic perspective calls for a re-evaluation of the concept of literature itself. Works in English literature cannot be taken as depicting the same level of inquiry into the concept of morality or spirituality as those that originate from an Islamic perspective. The idea that the former has a normative dimension has to be replaced with an acknowledgement that there exist significant differences between how Islam and the West view them. Yet issues in morality and, most significantly, the spirit, can provide solid foundations for a comparative analysis of Islam and English literature. In fact, the focus on the way literature is conceived as *adabiyāt* should be extended to include science-based philosophic enquiries into the nature of the spirit so as to place it in proper relations to Allah (s.w.t.) and education in general. A study of English literature can then be achieved by comparing between the different ways of enquiries into the spirit had been conceived by both traditions, particularly in the scientific philosophies of Western and Muslim thinkers. A comparative religion framework can also be employed to study works in English literature that tend to focus on religious issues. Some writings in English literature, however, do not deal with philosophy or religion. In this context, the degree of influence that Islam and Muslim peoples have had on English literature can be highlighted. In any case, the study of English literature is important because by following the aforementioned recommendations, at least two types of knowledge that al-Attas has listed as important to his concept of Islamic education would be added: Firstly, comparative religion from an Islamic point of view, and, secondly, Western culture and civilization. The last, however, should not be studied for its sake but, as al-Attas has clearly mentioned, “These must be designed as a means for Muslims to understand Islam in relation to other religions, cultures and civilizations —particularly that culture and civilization that has been, is, and will continue to be confronting Islam.”³²

³² Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam*, 42.

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