

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

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**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.<sup>1</sup> The need for decolonizing or indigenizing education is felt in almost all non-Western societies. As a mark of

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<sup>1</sup> 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?”<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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,”<sup>4</sup> 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.”<sup>5</sup> Most ironically, the subject was first introduced not

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

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

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

<sup>5</sup> 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."<sup>6</sup> 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

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<sup>6</sup> 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.”<sup>7</sup> 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

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