The Islamization of English Literary Studies: A Postcolonial Approach

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Abstract

In today's world where the former colonized are reshaping their relation with the colonizer, the concept of decolonizing or indigenizing education is widely discussed in postcolonial studies. Decolonizing/indigenizing education counters the western systems of knowledge's hegemony over those of non-western systems of thought and requires the development of a new approach to education that keeps in view the indigenous societies' socio-cultural and religious values and traditions. The Islamization of Knowledge undertaking maintains a similar approach, but additionally requires an Islamic perspective on knowledge. Among all western disciplines, English literature is arguably the most culturally charged and carries western value-laden ideas. This reality points to the need to look at it from Islamic perspectives. Based on this theoretical concept, this study seeks to establish the urgency and feasibility of Islamizing English (British) literary studies.

Introduction

The contemporary education system all over the world is largely based on western ethos, values, and intellectual traditions and retains powerful, quaint remnants of multilayered colonial paternalism. The more recognizable territorial, political, and economic aspects of colonial conquest and domination

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are less visible in today's world, as imperial ideology and its influence on non-western countries have taken subtler detours in the postcolonial world of diverse cultural settings. This is a result of the overarching influence of western thought and culture – modernity – that was imposed upon non-western societies and subsequently widened and deepened its reach, especially during the colonial period. Edward Said rightly regards imperialism as "an educational movement."[1] In order to perpetuate what is now widely known as cultural imperialism or a state of cultural dependency and domination, the colonial establishment laid the utmost emphasis on the education system of colonized countries, as Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-59), the exponent of British colonialism's cultural hegemony stated in Parliament on February 2, 1835:

> 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 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.[2]

Under this ideological premise characterized by haughtiness and "personal obduracy,"[3] the colonizers introduced a western education model that the former colonized still faithfully follow. Ironically, after decolonization the education system of colonial days not only remained but has expanded, a development that has, in turn, facilitated what Said calls a "relationship of historical dependence and subordination."[4] As a result, the influence of colonial education is hugely palpable in the former colonies and is thriving without necessitating the need for the colonizers' physical presence. While western influences are unmistakably evident in almost all modern disciplines, (English) literature along with anthropology,[5] history, and philosophy, is thought to be the most obvious one that continues to promote Eurocentric and colonialist values.[6] Therefore, a critical look at English literary studies from an Islamic, postcolonial perspective is needed.

Based on archival research, this paper sets out clearly the colonial genesis of English literature in order to establish an urgency to look at the subject Islamically as well as postcolonially. In this study, I assess the need and feasibility of Islamizing English literature and argue that such an undertaking is very much in keeping with the understanding of Islam and the literary tradition. In this regard, I also refute the usual argument that attempts to define lit-

erature as simply a reflection and enjoyment of beauty by excluding elements of truth and ethical concerns, and hence there is no need to locate its relevance to any higher moral code such as Islam. In order to foreground my discussion, I will describe the colonial provenance of English literature and the culturally charged circumstances of its introduction into Muslim societies.

As a global community, Muslims have been equally or more severely affected by colonial education policies. Trained in the (neo)colonial education systems and exposed to foreign cultures, the best minds in the Muslim world, those who could potentially guide their communities morally and intellectually, have largely become isolated from their own people and religious teachings. They are more conversant with foreign ideologies, which in many cases contradict their people's beliefs, than with Islamic religious teachings. Accordingly, as Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas contends, since their education is deeply rooted in colonial ideologies and practices, their "pursuit of knowledge becomes a deviation from the truth."[7] Thus the religious and intellectual crisis among educated Muslims has multiplied and sharply divided them from their fellow Muslims.

While the western educated elite, the carriers of secularization and other foreign ideas, is highly indifferent if not actually hostile to Islamic teachings, most of the traditionally educated Muslim religious scholars (the ulama) tend to cling to an anachronistic understanding of Islam and sometimes promote a wholesale rejection of the West's culture, civilization, and knowledge system. While the former are at fault for their uncritical reception and transmission of western sciences and thought, the latter are in the wrong for their exclusive pursuit of traditional Islamic studies. The secular intelligentsias in the Muslim world are in "a universal rush … toward imitating other civilizations"[8]; conversely, scholars affiliated with seminaries follow a traditional, static interpretation of the religious texts.

As a result, education is bifurcated due to the marked separation of the mundane and otherworldly realms, as well as of the earthly and religious spheres. This split has given birth to religio-intellectual crises in educated Muslims' minds, which Isma'il al-Faruqi and other scholars have called the intellectual "malaise of the Ummah." Therefore, like other postcolonial communities that face the pull of colonial and native intellectual tendencies, Muslims also feel the need to reshuffle their education system and to look at existing knowledge disciplines through the prism of Islamic teachings. This undertaking has triggered the inception of an academic movement widely known as the Islamization (or Islamicization) of Knowledge.

The need to address the issue of this polarized education system was felt during the colonial period itself, as manifested in the education reform move-

ments of Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) in the Arab world and Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-98) in the Indian subcontinent. Ironically, the contemporary Islamization of Knowledge movement was not launched by traditional Islamic scholars or in Muslim countries; rather, it was started by Muslim academics studying or teaching mainly western sciences at different seats of learning in the United States. It is worth noting that this country had not been a key player in classical colonialism or in its education policy, the latter of which had the paramount objective of turning colonized peoples into carriers of western ideas and values.

In order to address the religious and intellectual crisis of educated Muslims, as well as to contextualize education and strengthen its relevance to their sociocultural and religious backgrounds, a group of Muslim students based in the United States formed the Association of Muslim Social Scientists (AMSS) in 1972. This eventually led to the establishment of the metropolitan Washington, DC-based International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) in 1981. The institute emphasizes developing a "methodology and philosophy" for looking at various disciplines from Islamic perspectives, and explicates relevant Islamic principles in order to "integrate Islamic revealed knowledge with human knowledge" and thus revive Islamic values and articulate their benefits through academic and scholarly work across a broad range of subject areas.[9]

Since its inception, IIIT has launched several scholarly projects to look at various branches of knowledge from Islamic perspectives and has organized international educational conferences and seminars. Since August 1984, IIIT and AMSS have jointly published *The American Journal of Islamic Sciences* (AJISS), a double-bind peer-reviewed quarterly interdisciplinary journal that focuses on an analytical approach to social and human sciences from an Islamic worldview and on their application to Islamic studies and societies.[10] As a result of these and other scholarly projects and endeavors, scholars of the Islamization of Knowledge undertaking have made good breakthroughs in seeing branches of human and social sciences from Islamic epistemological assumptions.

However, compared to other branches of the human and social sciences, the study of English literature has not received adequate attention from these scholars, even though studying major issues of major English literary pieces from Islamic perspectives is extremely important. As a result, so far no significant work has been done on analyzing English literature from an Islamic viewpoint. Some very general works broadly discuss Islam and literature. The late Cambridge academic Syed Ali Ashraf (1925-98) produced some foundational work in this field. For example, his "Islamic Principles and Methods in the

Teaching of Literature" (1978) discusses the nature of literature as a whole and argues that, being a product of human activity, it cannot be "entirely good or entirely bad," as that is specifically the case with God and Satan, respectively.

One fundamental difference between divine revelation and literary production is that the former is believed to be infallible, while the latter can potentially be subject to human frailty, arrogance, and other shortcomings and limitations. Accordingly, while Muslims generally accept the great bulk of Islamic teachings without any qualms, they are supposed to be cautious when trying to discriminate between what is and what is not useful for them in both worlds in order to transpose the ideas encapsulated in literary works into quotidian life. So it is perhaps important for the Muslim practitioners of English literature to analyze the ideas and worldviews expressed in it via the light of the flawless, divine blueprint of Islamic teachings. This observation establishes the urgency of seeing human intellectual/imaginative productions from an Islamic viewpoint. Ashraf's scholarly endeavor in this regard, however, has not been followed up by other literary scholars.

Like other branches of human and social sciences, English literary texts are value-laden and inextricably linked to some cultural and religious ideas that need to be assessed according to the *tawhidic* paradigm and maxims. Despite that, no comprehensive work has been done in this field. Perhaps the reason for this inadequate interest in Islamizing English literature is the supposed incongruity between Islam and this literary tradition. Since English is "associated with conquest and colonialism" and "seen as inherently inhospitable to Islam,"[11] literature written in this particular language, especially British literature, is generally regarded as Islamophobic. As a result, perhaps, the implied remoteness of this literature from Islam may have discouraged scholars from devising comprehensive research projects to study it from Islamic epistemological viewpoints and premises.

The Arrival of English Literature in Muslim Societies

Like many other branches of the human and social sciences, the introduction of English literature into Muslim countries occurred during the colonial period. A common feature of classical colonialism is the complicity of knowledge and power, which Said expounds in his *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). Scholars and intellectuals accompanied the colonial administrators in order to study native languages and cultures and thus to help the colonizers undertake crucial social and political changes there. Equally, they also espoused their mission to promote European worldviews and ways of life.

For instance, when Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821) invaded Egypt in 1798 and thereby began the long history of European expeditions in the Arab world, he was accompanied not only by hundreds of ships loaded with an expeditionary force of 55,000 soldiers and sailors, but also with a shipload of savants who would study the country's architecture, ancient history, and society.

This was no different from the British expedition in India, as the East India Company was accompanied by a legion of British scholars who were later subdivided into the Orientalists and the Anglicists. Such complicity of scholarship with colonialism facilitated the perpetuation of Europe's imperialist, colonial culture even long after the physical departure of its administrative officials, missionaries, and military personnel. Colonial intellectuals not only studied the colonized country and its society, but also attempted to change the minds of the native peoples mainly by changing the indigenous education system and by introducing western knowledge.

It is now widely acknowledged that in British-ruled India, English literature was introduced specifically to train Indian elites in a western ethos and to impose its own values on the indigenous educated class. In the 1830s, the Orientalists and the Anglicists debated Indian education policy when the historian and politician Thomas Macaulay came from England and became deeply involved in the debate. This was to be expected, as the British government sent him there to oversee the educational and legal reforms undertaken in the colony. Sir William Jones (1746-94) and other Orientalists took part in the debate and favored important local languages along with English, arguing: "[The] British government should continue to foster instruction in Sanskrit and Arabic as well as in English for students in institutions of higher learning."[12] However, Macaulay joined the Anglicists who pursued an exclusivist agenda and argued that government funds should be employed "exclusively for the teaching of English."[13] In order to persuade the British government to agree with this proposal, he told Parliament:

> 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.[14]

Macaulay and other Anglicists won the political-intellectual battle of the time. This had far-reaching consequences, for it led to the official decision

that the colonial government would promote English language and literature and exclude Arabic and Sanskrit. Accordingly, Lord William Bentinck, governor-general of India from 1828 to 1835, passed a law on March 7, 1835:

> [T]he great objective of the British Government ought to be the promotion of European literature and science among the natives of India; and that all the funds appropriated to education would best be employed on English education alone.[15]

This ruling paved the way for the introduction of English literature as a subject of study at tertiary level in India in the 1830s. It was further institutionalized by establishing "three universities of Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta in 1857," as these institutions prioritized the study of English literature by Indian students.[16] English education in British India was a test case for the colonizers, and its success later on prompted its introduction in other colonies (e.g., Malaysia during the 1940s). Ironically, English literature as a subject of study was introduced at British universities only in the 1920s, about nine decades after it was done in India.

Considering the colonizers' underlying intent and objective of introducing English literature, as Macaulay's proclamation suggests, postcolonial theorists use such terms as *hegemony*, *universalism*, and *mimicry* to explain why colonial administrators brought the subject to the colonies. Explaining these terms and assessing them from the Islamic perspective is perhaps pertinent here. *Hegemony* is an implied means of power that ensures an indirect form of imperial dominance, one that does not need the use of military force because it is "much more subtle, much more pernicious than the form of blatant racism once exercised by the colonial West" to justify colonial rule.[17] So the colonizers considered hegemony a more effective tool, and English literature was used to realize it. As Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin state: "Searching for a method of communicating the values of Western civilization to Indians … the administration discovered the power of English Literature as a vehicle for imperial authority."[18] In other words, the colonizers used English literature to establish what is now widely known as linguistic and cultural imperialism. Accordingly, Gauri Viswanathan aptly regards English literature as "a surrogate Englishman in his highest and most perfect state."[19] Thus, even after decolonization English literature was intended to be an important colonial vehicle to perpetuate indirect colonial domination in a world of neocolonialism.

Universalism suggests the colonizers' attempt to extend English literature to other countries and thus to universalize western, colonial values. *Mimicry*,

defined as the act of imitating the colonizers' mannerisms and way of life, is done "by adopting the colonizer's cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values."[20] Frantz Fanon best illustrates this tendency in his *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), where he shows that the vast majority of the colonized intellectuals desperately try to imitate the colonizers' cultural code and thus to enjoy a privileged status among the colonized. In the case of British colonialism, English literary texts facilitated the dissemination of those British cultural values that students in colonized societies were to imitate and thereby gain eventual membership in the comprador class.

At base, these three underlying motives undoubtedly contradict the principles of Islamic teachings, as Islam is opposed to the blind imitation of cultural values that are at odds with its core teachings and to the ultimate goal of cultural imperialism: exploitation. Interestingly, in postcolonial studies these terms – *hegemony*, *universalism*, and *mimicry* – are treated as highly negative and the scholars of this academic discourse sternly critique the colonial agendas conceptualized by them.

The protest against western cultural hegemony is arguably the most dominant concern of postcolonial theory and criticism. As Chu Yiu Wai believes:

> In the 1980s, the academy witnessed the advent of postcolonial discourse. Numerous academic conferences, books and journals on postcolonialism appeared one after another. In the academic periphery, many viewed postcolonial discourse as a site of resistance against Western cultural hegemony.[21]

Equally, the idea underlying the pan-African negritude movement is also a form of resistance to the imposition of western values and cultural hegemony in Africa. In the same vein, Muslim scholar Ali Shariati (1933-77) "called for resistance to Western cultural imperialism" in his historic lecture series *Return to the Self*."[22] So proponents of the Islamization of Knowledge movement are neither new nor alone in standing against western cultural hegemony. In the question of defying the West's cultural domination, there is a strong convergence between postcolonial theorists and Muslim scholars. Thus it is wrong to contend that Islam, Muslim scholars, or the proponents of the Islamization of Knowledge are the sole opponents of this cultural domination. It is equally wrong to associate this knowledge movement with *Islamism* or *Islamic fundamentalism*.

Aside from the thrust of the postcolonial argument, Muslims are religiously obligated to stand against rampant colonial expeditions and pernicious western cultural hegemony. Islam advises Muslims to be vigilant against all kinds of political, cultural, religious, and military threats from potentially hostile forces.[23] Obviously, during colonialism and still in today's world, Muslims

have borne the brunt of full-scale imperial exploitation and subjection, as western (neo)colonial powers have thus far dominated (or even controlled) almost the entire Muslim world. The Qur'an commands Muslims to resist and stand against colonial occupation and subsequent exploitation. Perhaps this is why the Victorian British prime minister William E. Gladstone (1809-98), holding a copy of the Qur'an, once proclaimed in the House of Commons: "So long as the Egyptians have got this book with them, we will never be able to enjoy quiet or peace in that land."[24] This suggests that Islam's teachings have the potential to strengthen the will of Muslims to withstand colonial incursions and the ensuing repression as well as cultural control and domination.

In addition to these commands,[25] the Qur'an warns them against imitating un-Islamic lifestyles and explicitly instructs them to follow what God has revealed to them as opposed to other ideologies or belief systems.[26] Similar admonitions are there in prophetic traditions, for example: "He who imitates a people will be regarded as one of them"[27] and "The one who imitates people other than us is not from us. Do not imitate the Jews or the Christians."[28] Islamic scholars believe that these Qur'anic and prophetic statements do not carry any sense of hatred or prejudice for non-Muslims; rather, they encourage Muslims to maintain their religious and cultural distinctiveness and to not blindly and randomly imitate the fashions, practices, and behavior of other religious or ideological communities.

Importantly, these religious precepts should not lead one to conclude that Islam is opposed to cultural exchanges with non-Muslims. Muslim scholars emphasize the need to approach the Qur'an and the Sunnah's directives holistically and to consider the overall spirit of the Islamic creed when ruling on such issues. It is important to note that Muslims are advised to maintain good relations with and to learn from people of other faith communities, for there is no harm in doing so. In fact, Prophet Muhammad advises the faithful to seek knowledge and wisdom wherever they can find it.[29] Since Islam does not restrict the sources of knowledge, Muslims can seek valid, meaningful, and useful knowledge from wherever they wish. Since English literature is one important source of learning, approaching it to increase one's knowledge is both permissible and recommended. Obviously, however, Muslim practitioners of English literature should discriminate between useful and harmful elements when studying and teaching the subject.

Prophetic narratives further endorse this contention. In order to reject the unjust social and cultural practices of pre-Islamic Arab society, Prophet Muhammad did not promote a complete disavowal of pre-Islamic literature. For example, he had a very high regard for the poetry of Labid, a pre-Islamic poet, and reportedly said: "The truest word (ever) uttered by a poet is the say-

ing of Labid: 'Behold! Everything besides Allah is vain.'"[30] The Prophet also appreciated the non-Muslim poet Umayya ibn Abi Salt, for once after listening to his poetry he commented that this man "was about to become a Muslim" or was "almost a Muslim in his poetry."[31]

Rather than reject the sociocultural practices and literary heritage of the pre-Islamic Arabs, the Prophet expressed his appreciation of all good pieces of poetry that reached him. Accordingly, Islam does not promote the wholesale rejection of English literature, and Muslims do not have to reject these literary texts in order to reject colonial cultures and western epistemological hegemony. In reality, Muslims can benefit by studying these very texts and thereby enrich their knowledge of western culture and civilization. This will eventually facilitate a deeper understanding between Islam and the West. The Qur'an encourages such cultural bridge-building and exchanges, as it appreciates cultural diversity.[32]

Obviously, the study of English literature gives Muslims a good exposure to the West's knowledge systems and its cultural practices. This knowledge then helps them acquire a better and more accurate understanding of the West. Needless to say, however, Muslims are required to scrutinize the content of that knowledge before they accept it as a basis of moral judgment or pursue it as an area of study, because the Prophet sought refuge in God from knowledge "which does not benefit."[33] If exposure to a particular literary tradition is morally or religiously detrimental, then Islam does not encourage its followers to pursue it. Once when the Prophet saw a poet reciting something, he told his Companions: "Catch the Satan or detain the Satan, for filling the belly of a person with pus is better than stuffing his brain with poetry."[34]

Therefore, Muslims who study English literature are supposed to differentiate between what is good and what is bad in order to protect themselves from untoward cultural influences. The postcolonial twin strategy of "abrogation" and "appropriation" gives an added theoretical impetus to those Muslims who want to approach English literature critically without losing their distinctiveness and identity as Muslims. In other words, given the colonial genealogy of English literature, Muslims may approach it keeping in view their religious beliefs and practices and without compromising Islamic values.

Is Islamizing English Literature a Far-Fetched Notion?

Said considers English literary texts to be complex materials "tied to circumstances and to politics large and small"; hence, he is opposed to any notion of their uncritical reception.[35] He shares the experience of his encounter with

teaching English literature at Arab universities where no emphasis was "placed on relationship between English and the colonial processes that brought the language and its literature" to the region.[36] A similar look at the English literature syllabus, as well as teaching approaches and methodology at universities in other non-western societies, may give an identical picture. Said perceives a historical amnesia in the pedagogical culture, for it remains oblivious to the complicity of English literature with colonial domination. He argues that imperialism and the (English) novel, for that matter English literature as a whole, are interdependent and it is, therefore, impossible "to read one without in some way dealing with the other."[37]

Said's claim rejects any method of approaching English literary studies in an orthodox manner, as he implicitly promotes an anti-colonial perspective on teaching the subject. While Islam sanctions this viewpoint, Muslim scholars of English literature are religiously required to add one more point of view: an analysis of the context from an Islamic perspective. Europe, especially Britain, encountered multifarious psychological and ideological questions involving colonialism, fascism, war, feminism, communism, and other ideas. Since religion in Europe was weakened by various factors, writers could posit no divine solutions to many of the social and individual psychological problems that have engulfed the continent. This reality prompted them to follow different types of man-made ideologies, which have been represented in western literary productions.

When such literary works are taught in Muslim societies, it is important to look at them from an Islamic viewpoint in order to provide Islamic responses to many of the conceptual, ideological questions that British writers handle and transpose in their works. Since Islam is still fundamental to Muslim societies, it is important to approach English literature "with reference to a basic norm of values derived from religion."[38] Ignoring such an intellectual project may be a disservice to the student community:

> If the teacher, on the other hand, takes a permissive attitude and considers a writer whose code of life is completely at variance with the Islamic code, and leaves students in vacua, and allows them to respond to that writing or be influenced by it as they like, he will not be doing justice either to literature or to his students. Literature can be extremely seductive and may even be misleading, corrosive and destructive.[39]

Studying English literature may not benefit Muslim students if those who teach it do not bother to protect their students from the pitfalls of foreign ideas by informing them about the Islamic worldview. Ali Ashraf's fear is still per-

tinent in today's world. What is more, a survey on how this subject is taught even at Islamic universities may reveal the degree of negligence about the lecturers' moral, Islamic duties when training students in English literature. If, as Viswanathan believes,[40] the English literary text is a surrogate Englishman, teachers who teach the subject to promote western values run the risk of being regarded as, to use Said's words, "regional surrogates."[41] Thus it is extremely important to start this discourse of Islamizing English literature in order to clarify to scholars and students of this literary tradition how to bring in Islamic teachings while discussing English literary texts.

Moreover, like any other literary tradition English literature tells the story of human life as it concerns the experiences, sorrows, and happiness of human beings. Literature is, first and foremost, about various types of tortuous, intertwined human experiences. This is also very much the case with Islam, as its fundamental message (according to Muslims) consists of what is good and what is bad for human beings, their wellbeing, meaningful existence, and responsibilities as God's vicegerents on Earth.[42] The most important source of Islamic teachings, the Qur'an, constitutes a divine message addressed exclusively to humanity.[43] So in terms of the central subject matter, there is a striking commonality between Islam and literature: Both primarily concern human life. On the basis of this important theoretical framework, I argue that Islamizing English literature, and for that matter any other literary tradition, is a viable intellectual endeavor that can provide some direction for scholars of this literary tradition as to how to approach it Islamically. Logically, since human beings are at the center of both Islam and literature, establishing the relevance of one to the other should not be regarded as a far-fetched idea.

In order to Islamize English literature, however, there should be a harmony of opinion among its practitioners on two issues. First, they should accept the fact that, somewhat like literature, Islam covers all aspects of human life and thus presents a comprehensive account of the human code of conduct. Therefore, dominant ideas expressed in English literary pieces can be assessed according to the Islamic worldview. People who do not believe this and thus relegate Islam to otherworldly matters may hesitate to undertake a discourse of relating Islam to literary studies or may be unable to establish a strong link between Islam and literature. So, in order to undertake the intellectual project of Islamizing English literature, scholars should work at two levels: that of thought and that of knowledge. In other words, they should first of all believe in the comprehensiveness of Islamic teachings and their potential applicability in all aspects of life, and then acquire a reasonable understanding of Islam so that they can relate the issues discussed in literary pieces to it.

Second, scholars of the Islamization of English literature should take the didactic, as opposed to the belletristic, approach when discussing literature. Literary scholars fascinated or mesmerized by the concept of artistic beauty without truth and value will not welcome the idea of reading and appreciating literary works in the light of moral values or religious guidelines. Islamic teachings are based on strong moral codes and thus can be related to literature only if the latter is deemed to have both aesthetic and instructional functions. In other words, if literature is thought to be divorced from moral content and principles it can never be looked at from the teachings of Islam, as the latter's primary function is to instruct and guide human beings. Therefore, literary scholars who believe in the West's concept of art for art's sake may understandably oppose the idea of Islamizing English literature.

Is Art for Art's Sake?

The phrase *art for art's sake* "connotes the idea that a work of art has an intrinsic value without didactic and moral purpose."[44] Such a perception goes very much against the idea of the Islamization of literature, which seeks to see literary texts in the light of Islam, for its whole edifice is based on set moral values and ethical standards. I contest the belief that literature should be completely isolated from the commands of any ethical or religious code. Practitioners and commentators of literature who are opposed to seeing literary pieces from moral, didactic perspectives regard them as independent of the element of truth and as a complete manifestation of beauty only. However, I believe in the Keatsian theory of combing truth with beauty in a work of art – "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."[45] The aesthetic beauty of literature and a solid sense and conviction of truth should be akin to one another. Conversely, advocates of art for art's sake tend to argue that literary pieces do not have to contain any moral precepts or instructive values, nor do they have to command what is good and forbid what is evil. Thus they call for a radical rejection of widely held moral principles and religious values when producing or studying literature.

The art for art's sake movement is a nineteenth-century western phenomenon, even though the idea was arguably first put forward by the German writer and critic Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-81). In *Laokoon oder Über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* (1766),[46] he refers to classical Greek artistic practices and argues that beauty is "the primary object of the arts."[47] This idea was promoted and further developed by nineteenth-century western lit-

erary scholars. The ensuing dispute of *art for art's sake* versus art for the common good has remained a highly contentious issue in the world of art and creative writing since the nineteenth and twentieth centuries onward.

In a lecture in Paris in 1818, French philosopher Victor Cousin (1792-1867) said: "We must have religion for religion's sake, morality for morality's sake, as with art for art's sake ... the beautiful cannot be the way to what is useful, or to what is good, or to what is holy; it leads only to itself."[48] In this way, he separates the notion of artistic beauty from any social, moral, or religious commitment. In 1834, the art for art's sake idea gathered momentum and was eventually taken up by other scholars when Théophile Gautier (1811-72) turned the movement "into a credo" through his polemical preface to his somewhat raunchy and (to many) shocking *Mademoiselle De Maupin: A Romance of Love and Passion* (1887), a novel of bisexuality that promotes lesbian love.[49] Soon after that a number of scholars, among them the French writer Victor Hugo (1802-85), the French painter Benjamin Constant (1845-1902), the Irish writer Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), and the American poet and critic Edgar Allan Poe (1809-49), made strong arguments in favor of the idea that a work of art has nothing to do with conventional morality. Poe elaborates his theory of poetry in his posthumously published essay "The Poetic Principle" (1850). While he opposes the idea of too long or too short poems, he also criticizes any attempt to associate didacticism with poetry and, by extension, literary work. He regards the very notion of the didactic in relation to literature as "heresy."

> I allude to the heresy of *The Didactic*. It has been assumed, tacitly and avowedly, directly and indirectly, that the ultimate object of all Poetry is Truth. Every poem, it is said, should inculcate a moral; and by this moral is the poetical merit of the work to be adjudged. … but the simple fact is, that, … under the sun there neither exists nor can exist any work more thoroughly dignified — more supremely noble than this very poem — this poem per se — this poem which is a poem and nothing more — this poem written solely for the poem's sake.[50]

Like other art for art's sake proponents, Poe argues that poetry and, for that matter, any literary piece should be written or used only for the ultimate goal of aesthetic beauty and enjoyment and not for any didactic or moral purpose. A number of literary critics and scholars turned the aphorism of art for art's sake or literature for literature's sake into a rallying cry for aestheticism as opposed to didacticism in the nineteenth-century West, a trend that had a tremendous impact on the literary practices of subsequent years, even though

the idea has both attracted and been resisted by scholars of literature. Thus this debate has caused the very concept of literature to vacillate between didacticism and belletrism.

Both western and non-western scholars have contested the dictum of art for art's sake. In a letter to a friend in 1872, the French feminist writer George Sand (1804-76) termed this slogan "an empty phrase" and argued that artistic work should be devoted to both "the good and the beautiful."[51] The Chinese dramatist Cao Yu (1910-96) regards this theory as "a philosophy of the well-fed."[52] The great Indian novelist Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004) strongly rejects any attempt to separate art or literature from the condition of society and from the suffering of humanity. He believes in the social benefits of literature and in the writer's social responsibility: "But any writer who said that he was not interested in *la condition humaine* was either posing or yielding to a fanatical love of isolationism."[53] Chinua Achebe of Nigeria states his case in the following terms:

> Some time ago, in a very testy mood, I began a lecture with these words: *Art for art's sake is just another piece of deodorised dog-shit.* Today ... I should be quite prepared to modify my language if not my opinion. In other words I will still insist that art is, and was always, in the service of man. Our ancestors created their myths and legends and told their stories for a human purpose (including, no doubt, the excitation of wonder and pure delight); they made their sculptures in wood and terra cotta, stone and bronze to serve the needs of their times. Their artists lived and moved and had their being in society, and created their works for the good of that society.[54]

Thus he characterizes the idea of art for art's sake as a western construct and distances African literary practices from the notion of an outright exclusion of literature from moral values or social functions. Actually he is not alone in this, as most other contemporary great African novelists have "stressed the need to see African literature in relationship to the society which produced it …."[55] So, unlike the movement's proponents, African writers believe in literature's utilitarian value and refuse to separate works of art from their utility functions in the everyday world. According to them, literary productions should have a purpose and should be used to bring positive change to people's lives and benefit society.

This essentially utilitarian view of literature is very much in line with the Islamic concept of knowledge. Like other branches of learning, Islam holds that literature must serve a purpose and benefit human beings. As a prophetic narrative reads: "The worst person on the Day of Judgment will be the one

whose *'ilm* (knowledge) does not benefit anyone."[56] Thus, as literature is an important branch of human knowledge, the Islamic concept of *'ilm nāfi'* (beneficial knowledge) goes very much against the nineteenth-century slogan of art for art's sake. For Muslims, a work of art should either benefit them materially or spiritually, because happiness in both worlds is the aim of Islamic teachings. If this is not the case, then artistic or literary practices will be deemed a waste of God-given talents.

The twentieth-century English novelist and critic Marmaduke Pickthall uses the terms *aid* and *refreshment* to describe the Islamic concept of artistic work. He argues that according to Islam, literature should guide and help its recipients follow the right path (Islam) and should entertain them decently as they progress on their life journey to attain a higher purpose. If a work of art serves neither function, then Islam does not sanction it.[57] As regards creatively and imaginatively representing human life and nature, Islam stipulates that an artist should "convey what [nature] represents" so that both "the artist, and those who experience the art, get closer to Allah."[58] In this respect, the Qur'anic concept of *ulū al-bāb* is pertinent, as it encourages people of understanding to study natural law and then to appreciate and transmit its meaning and message to others.[59] The entire bulk of Islamic teachings guide human beings to success in this world and the next, and Islam urges all people to use their "gifts and faculties" to attain this.[60]

Accordingly, as opposed to scholars who believe in art for art's sake and may not appreciate any need for Islamizing literary pieces, Muslim scholars of literature will approach this undertaking with a didactic and utilitarian view. They will locate all of the literature's beautiful aspects and thus will simultaneously appreciate the beauty of God and His creation as well as identify the harmful elements so that those will not affect the reader negatively. The prophetic statement "God is beautiful and He loves beauty"[61] suggests that Muslims are not supposed to dismiss the element of beauty in a work of art. What they need to do is to combine the elements of beauty and truth, somewhat like the Keatsian view mentioned above.

As Islam requires its adherents to follow a set of moral principles and codes of conduct that should govern their quotidian life, Muslims logically cannot support the idea of art for art's sake. Works of art, according to Islam, are not interested in "beautifying and refining the accessories of human life," but in beautifying and exalting "human life itself."[62] Therefore, their perception of literature should differ from the exclusively aesthetic tendency and non-utilitarian approach of some western scholars. As Jean-Louis Michon states:

> [A] characteristic of artistic creativity in Islam is that it is never exercised "gratuitously", by which we are to understand that it always answers to well-defined ends. Unlike the art of the modern West, Islamic art has never known the distinction between an art supposedly "pure", or "art for art's sake", and a utilitarian or applied art, the first aiming solely at provoking an aesthetic emotion and the second supposedly responding to some need. In fact, Islamic art is always "functional", that is to say useful […].[63]

Islam regards each literary piece as a means to attain a particular goal and not as an end in itself. A work of art will be assessed according to its usefulness for individuals and societies. Hence, Islam also does not idolize artistic or literary pieces, as the objective of literary practices is to render good service to human beings instead of apotheosizing literature or litterateurs. In line with this approach Ali Ashraf, the great proponent of the Islamization of literary studies and literary critic, convincingly questions the notion of art for art's sake:

> Is literature such a discipline that it should be regarded as something beyond the pale of all moral and social codes of life? Is its realization of truth so sacred that all other truths have to be forgotten, the code of life be suspended and all value judgments not be exercised in order to appreciate it?[64]

Thus he rejects the view that artistic work is fundamentally antinomian and rhetorically outlines the purpose of studying literature from a moral perspective. Although "beauty" and "pleasure" are two important aspects of literary pieces, they are not the end but rather the means of realizing a higher goal: "Aesthetic pleasure is only a means to lull the argumentative self asleep and lead the reader into the stage of the contemplation of Reality presented by the writer. Literary education thus is complementary to religious education."[65] In other words, he strongly promotes the inculcation of Islamic teachings in literary studies and sets up the foundation of Islamizing English literature by giving some broad principles and general guidelines.

The scope of this article does not allow a comprehensive analysis of the various arguments in favor of and against the maxim of art for art's sake. However, what is important here is the fact that the very notion that literature is self-inclusive and an end in itself and has no role to play in terms of benefiting human beings is contrary to Islamic teachings. Such a dogmatic approach apotheosizes literature and deifies its practitioners, something that Islamic monotheism totally rejects. There may be many Muslim academics of English literature who agree with the art for art's sake doctrine and hence do not deem it feasible to relate Islam to literary discussion. In order to foreground the con-

cept of Islamizing English literature, therefore, scholars active in this field need to focus on debunking this doctrine while highlighting the comprehensive application of Islam's moral system in human life. As Zarah Hussain states: "The idea is that as Islam is integral to every part of a Muslim's life and makes it beautiful, so Islamic art should be used to make the things of everyday life beautiful."[66] Compartmentalizing human life into different segments and selectively relating Islam to various aspects of human life go very much against the Islamization of literature.

Conclusion

Scholars of the Islamization of Knowledge movement divide knowledge into two types: revealed and acquired. The former is not their main concern, unless there is a need to make Islamic ethics relevant to contemporary issues in a systematic manner. The principal focus of the Islamization of Knowledge proponents is acquired/human knowledge, which, they believe, needs to be assessed according to the Islamic worldview. Literary studies in general and English literature in particular are important components of knowledge. In this essay I have argued that undertaking the intellectual endeavor of Islamizing this literary tradition is both methodologically necessary and conceptually feasible. If Islam is deemed to be a religion with comprehensive teachings that pervade all aspects of human life, and if literature is believed to have utilitarian and instructive purposes, then this intellectual movement of Islamizing English literature may generate a great deal of interest among literary scholars, especially those from the Muslim world. Eventually this field will receive the attention that it deserves.

Despite the supposedly historical animosity between Islam and English literature based on the latter's colonial genealogy, Muslims in today's world appreciate the inevitability of a knowledge of English and its literature. Actually, the situation of English in the postcolonial world "may be likened to that of a loving yet constantly bickering couple who can live neither with nor without each other."[67] This is also the case in Muslim societies where English studies have become part and parcel of educational curricula and where the English language is widely used by Muslims to express their own cultural and religious experiences. However, many Muslims may feel the need to approach this field in the light of their religious teachings.

The wholesale rejection of English literature is neither possible nor practical. Nor is it unequivocally necessary, especially given its widespread reception in Muslim society. What Muslims need to do is to look at it through

the prism of the postcolonial twin strategy of abrogation and appropriation, which is in line with the concept of Islamization. Therefore, in order to contextualize English literary texts and this literary tradition's major authors in Muslim societies both ideologically and culturally, as well as to orientate Muslim students to norms in Islam while teaching English literature, Muslim scholars of English literature need to Islamize the subject, that is, to approach it in the light of Islamic teachings. This is an important intellectual challenge for them, for such an academic endeavor will allow them to benefit from what is good in English literary texts and protect them from what is morally and culturally harmful and contrary to their religious values.

Endnotes

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