

Teaching Islamic Literature in English as a Background for Introducing Iranian Students to a Variety of Literatures in English

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ABSTRACT

Teaching English literature and/or literature in English to Iranian university students poses problems for both the student and the teacher. On the other hand, a great majority of both students and teachers of English in Iran seem to be unaware of Islamic and/or Muslim literature in English. One of the ways to overcome this barrier is by teaching Islamic literature to Iranian university students in English. In this way, they are introduced to both literary English and Islamic literature in English in an easy way.

Key words: Islamic literature, teaching Islamic literature, literature in English, English literature in Iran, Muslim literature.

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Introducing our Iranian university students to English literature proves quite a demanding task. The hardships of the task lie in certain problem areas: the student's English language proficiency, his or her familiarity with reading advanced English and particularly literary texts and, above all, the culture in which English literature was produced. [1]

There have been too many definitions of "literature" such that coming up with a clear, universal, and agreed-upon definition of it seems almost impossible. The British literary critic Terry Eagleton made a statement in that "literature" cannot be defined with precision. [2] despite this fact, literature is minimally "an interpretive presentation of experience in an artistic form." [3] Based on this premise, literature is expected to function as a representation of what actually takes, or has taken, place in a culture. On the other hand, the student's background and familiarity with the culture of the literature in focus plays a key role in his or her appreciation of it. It is a reality that for a typical Iranian Muslim student of English literature who has not met, or made friends with, a Christian classmate or neighbor, and/or has not read a passage of the Bible, at least in Persian translation, it must be very hard to figure out allusions to the Bible in a literary piece in English. The same problem holds true when a literary passage has references and allusions to a certain aspect of an English-speaking society or culture. [4] Despite these facts, it is clear that better appreciation of any language can be obtained when its literature is studied in its original language. Hence better and more profound learning of English can take place when some pieces of English literature and/or literature in English [5] are offered to the student .

Over against the above considerations, there seems to be some midways and short-cuts for introducing typical Iranian students to literature in English.

One of the ways to achieve this goal seems to be through teaching certain pieces of Islamic literature in English to Iranian students.[6] By doing so, Iranian students would not feel confused or baffled at the moment of being introduced to literature, or at least poetry, in English. One of the main problems in the way of studying literature in a foreign language is receiving a kind of textual culture-shock, that is, coming across things that are unfamiliar to the student. Such unfamiliar things or notions include strange names of people, places, customs, and events. Since typical Iranian students, particularly those who study English in remote cities, can hardly avail themselves of sources that clarify difficult notions, it seems that introducing Islamic or literature in English to them would pave the way for them .

There can be a two-fold division of what may be conventionally referred to as Islamic literature. The first one is a type of Islamic literature produced originally in English. The other form of Islamic literature is such a literature in English translation. [7] Some fragments of this type of literature which was produced originally in Classical Arabic have appeared in English translation .

It seems that making use of Islamic and/or Muslim literature can pave the way for introducing typical Iranian students to literature in English. This way may in the long run lead to encouraging the talented students to try their hands at producing literary works based on purely Islamic teachings.

Conclusion

Based on the observations highlighted, it is not only desirable but also necessary to teach Islamic literature in English to our Iranian students. This type of education must start from their secondary/ high school English textbooks and continue to their university English courses. However, for those who major in English, specific courses in Islamic literature in English must be prepared.

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Notes:

[1] Some other problem areas are discussed in Hooshang Honarvar, "The specific problems of the Iranian college students with English literature and some hypothetical questions," *Journal of the Faculty of Letters and the Humanities, University of Tehran*, Vol. 26 (1-4), serial no. 105-108 (Autumn 1367 Sh/ 1988), pp. 1-23.

[2] Terry Eagleton, *The Event of Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 32.

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[3] Leland Ryken, *The Literature of Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), p. 13.

[4] This problem is reinforced in present-day Iranian society in which typical Western culture and values are continually reproached and debased in the governmental media.

[5] Literature in English" can reflect the cultural values of virtually any nation or community in English, e. g., Indian literature in English, or Chinese literature in English.

[6] It is necessary to make a distinction between "Islamic literature" and "Muslim literature". While "Islamic literature" must necessarily reflect Islamic teachings, events, and creed, "Muslim literature" simply reflects non-Islamic and merely national or regional literature produced by Muslims of any country or community.

[7] There are certain fine English translations of Islamic classics, e. g., the Holy Quran, the Nahj al-Balaghah, and hadiths. It is a pity that such texts have seldom made their way in (at least our Iranian) university courses of English .

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