

Narrative Protocols, Dialogic Imagination and Identity Contestation: A Critique of a Prescribed English Literature Curriculum

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Abstract:

A critique of the prescribed Anglo-American canon for Jordanian Universities, this article utilises narrative protocols and storytelling juxtaposed against my own literary education and a former student of mine. It examines how lived experiences, identity contestations and reconciliations are reflected and reinforced in a dialogic exchange with the study of English literature at undergraduate, graduate levels as well as while teaching. In the 'New Times' of cyberspaces and the Internet accretion, the data used in this study is gathered through email and Facebook message exchange between a former student of mine and myself. After first introducing the English literary curriculum used in Jordanian universities, this article offers a critique of the canon pointing out that the study of English literature. As traditionally conceived in these universities, this tradition reinforces Eurocentrism, monolithic, elitism and particularly, and for the purpose of this article, in the ways it is disseminated, it signifies relations of power in the academy. It further shows how the subject-positions of students of English in this context are contested between repulsion, conformity, and when textual cultural representations are at stake, they pass through a process of an 'imbibing' construction of identity that reconciles warring sentiments of love and agony. The paper concludes by reminding literature educators that some students bring profound experiences of anguish and identity contestation with them to the literature classroom, and that it is therefore our responsibility to challenge the hegemonic and essentialised ideologies and practices informed by the adoption, perpetuation and dissemination of the literary canon in these educational contexts.

Key words: Arab World Literary Education, Anglo-American Literary Canon, Critical Pedagogy, Identity Construction, Literary Criticism

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Locus of enunciation

At times, personal reflections and narratives might mount up as an emancipatory domineering force, when someone just becomes aware of the demoralising experience of having read about his/her identity as the ‘other’ to a corpus of canonised, and to far extent, colonialist apparatuses of English literary texts. Although the trajectory of my personal, academic and professional life has prepared me to challenge the dominant assumptions about the representativeness of the prescribed literary canon, until this point, there is little in my educational and professional experiences have changed. Probably, like many others passing through similar experiences, I feel the demand to confront the fury and agony while revealing my literary education: to interrogate poetry from antiquity; to remember to read with a 21st – century critical intellect; to remember how, those who spent their life time constructing their emancipatory projects, have provided us with tools to deconstruct the essentialist and monolithic tendencies of the ‘authoritative literary text’; to reconcile with the ‘townness’ of our identity, and, hence, to offer carrying hands to those students who are intensely driven to read, to write, to learn, to reason, to make assumption about the world and about themselves, to critique, and to be ‘successful’ in doing their English literature.

Additionally, this personal narrative aims to confront the pedagogical *violence* [strictly emphasised] in the curricular canon. In so doing, my outlook is to subdue the misrepresentations and the making of the imaginary ‘other’ to be internalised and ‘normalised’ by our students. We need to balance our curiosity about how we, professors of English, should work within and against such curricula in order to delight the beauty of centuries of the English literary text without perpetuating monolithic myths. In short, through this article, aims to set out an emancipatory project; how to open canons; how to negotiate with identity construction (Abu-Shomar, 2012) while doing English that is over strict and conservative, “from Beowulf to Virginia Wolf” (Hall, 2005); how to educate with ‘hope’ (Freire, 1989); and how to be crossing borders (Giroux, 1992).

The Context of curricular literary canons

For an understanding of the current status of the curricular canon in the English departments in most Arab World countries, 17 English programmes were reviewed, and strikingly found that 92% of the selected periods and genre are either British or American literatures. In addition to this, in most of the reviewed plans, the names of the courses are quite similar. For example, 10 out of 17 universities share exactly courses including Introduction (or survey) to English (British) Literature, Introduction(or survey) to American Literature, English (British) Literature Until 1660, American Literature Until 1800, English (British) Literature from 1660 to 1798, Nineteenth-century English (British) Literature, Nineteenth-century American Literature, Shakespeare (share in all the reviewed plans), The English (British) Novel, The American Novel, Victorian Poetry, Romantic Poetry. The remaining varying courses also reflect the Anglo-American tradition. Examples of these courses are Rise of British Prose, British Prose 1830-1830, Modern American Prose, Contemporary British and American Prose, Medieval English Poetry, Poetry from the Romantic Per. to the 18th century, Shakespeare and the Renaissance and Modern British and American Drama. Only 8 out of 17 plans include only *one* course World Literatures, with varying names.

As can be seen in the above survey, the Anglo-American literary tradition dominates the English literature plans in most of the English departments in the Arab World. The irony is that

unlike most English Department in the 'centre', most Arab World English departments are staffed with Anglo-American curricular canon. Zughoul (1986) examines the structure of English departments in 'Third World' universities including their curricula, objectives, policies, – concludes that the adopted tradition lacks a complete covering of literatures written in English. Instead,

the offerings typically include such titles as medieval literature, English poetry from Chaucer to Milton, Shakespeare, poetry from Dryden to the present, metaphysical poetry, Renaissance drama, Victorian literature, Romantics, Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, seventeenth-century English literature (p. 10).

Zughoul argues that such a tradition, which aims to 'broaden the intellectual horizons of the students and to sharpen their sensibilities', has served as a theoretical framework for teaching literature in the university systems in 'Third World' countries. Such a tradition is deeply rooted in what Mathieson (as cited in Zughoul, 1986, p. 12) calls 'the Victorian educators tradition' which believes in the 'character building powers of the classical English curriculum', where the study of these literatures or classics becomes not just a subject for academic study, but one of the chief temples of the human spirit, in which all should worship. Such a tradition is imported in its totality without considering the cultural, social, and moral backgrounds of the host context.

Challenging such an 'institutional culture', according to Zughoul' (1986) is far from easy. Within the understanding of the institutional cultural capital that seeks to maintain its power, any attempt to change "could be difficult and slow paced because a whole generation of old-timers running those institutions may feel more secure with the established patterns" (p. 16). Yet, challenging such traditions is not impossible; it is a task that prioritises a 'discursive practice' that espouses all forms of knowledge as valid. However, in so doing, the challenge should be first directed to those in power (*i.e.* the institutional class). Bordie (as cited in Zughoul, p. 16) points out that it is time for that old-fashioned and powerful class to realise that the application of old, somewhat stereotyped procedures to existing situations is not likely to lead to meaningful or beneficial solutions if only because older procedures have been superseded by procedures which relate directly to present day needs, [since] solving today's problems with yesterday's answers is what has gotten us into the bind we are in now.

Under the influence of a 'globalised world ideology' (Zughoul, 1999), institutional models, such as those in Jordan, experience a flow from the centre to the periphery, where the latter is dependent on the experience and the aids of those of the former, they are a replica of the centre. Schiller (quoted in Zughoul, 1999, p. 4) affirms that:

cultural imperialism is the sum of processes by which a society is brought into the modern world system and how its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating centre of the system.

Specifically, as English literature has become entrenched as an academic subject at post-colonial universities, such as those in Jordan where 95% of the courses in the English department are listed are Anglo-American (Elhaija, 2004), the study of literature has turned out to be a 'counterfeit' of the high cultural approach of those in the West. Paradoxically, while literary study at the centre today has overthrown such an approach, post-colonial institutions continue not only to pronounce the canon as an irrefutable entity of adoption, but also propagate its

everlasting value. They continue to rehearse a 'colonial ideology' that seeks to perpetuate its cultural products as having a taken-for-granted significance. Ashcroft *et al.* (1989) maintain that

proponents of English as a discipline linked its methodology to that of the Classics, with its emphasis on scholarship, philology, and historical study – the fixing of texts in historical time and the perpetual search for the determinants of a single, unified, and agreed meaning (p. 3).

In these terms, the context of Arab curricular canon be understood, an over conservative and strict representing a 'long tradition' of hegemonic practice that not only disadvantage students of English, but also perpetuates an essentialised construction of relation of perceived power. To probe into an interrogation of such a tradition on the identity of English learners, I use story-telling and narrative methodological approach to construe a critique of the Arab English canons

Method

In a postmodernist world, social media and cyber culture world, research have witnessed radical shifts from traditions to novelties, which have attested their trustworthiness, responsibility and credibility as well as the morality of knowledge-making. The claim for knowledge provided in this article draws on personal narratives through email exchange between me and my former undergraduate student seven years ago, and who is now preparing defend her master degree thesis. Upon my graduation, I took a teaching position in a Jordanian university very similar to the one I received my bachelor and master degrees. Now after 22 years of leaving university with bachelor degree of English, I was staggered to see that the curricular canon I studied remains the same. I taught for only one semester and left the country to each in another university in the region. The email and Facebook correspondences with my former student started when she sent me asking for assistance to help her deciding which track (linguistics, translation or literature) to choose for her graduate study. Although my literary instinct could push me to tell her to choose literature, I left it upon her to decide for herself, and she selected the literature track. Since then, both have exchanged emails discussing her education wherein we divulged our educational concerns and views of the prescribed literary canon. After one year of correspondence, a huge body of knowledge (data) has been stored in my email in a form of personal narratives, stories, reflections, discussions, textual analyses, critical views of adopted institutional policies among many other topics. For an interpretation of these narratives, and counternarratives, an amalgam of outlooks have emerged: on the one hand, those personal narratives are used to construct knowledge through which the current English literary tradition is perceived as a sources of 'authoritative texts' (Said, 1983) through which the students are degraded victimised, muted, normalised and imbibed in channels not of their own selections. The counternarratives, on the other hand, are the ones of resistance, dissent and survival, the ones emerged when these narratives are challenged and defied. This is how I obtained data, and how I used it in this article.

Narrative technique in social research and in critical inquiry in particular, has been gaining momentum (Polkinghorne, 1988; Booth & Booth, 1996; Emden, 1998; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Baynham, 2003; Phillion and He, 2010). Its impetus has been associated with critical strands of thought such as the growing frustration over the problem of the 'disappearing individual' in social research (Whittemore et al., 1986). As Gone et al. (1999) argue, "personal narrative is a privileged site for the investigation of cultural identity and its construction" (p.

371). It also emerged as a reaction against the 'over-determined' view of reality brought by methods that impose order on a messy world (Faraday and Plummer, 1997). In a post-positivist tradition, it appeared as a "creeping disenchantment with research that subordinates the realm of personal experience to the quest for generalisation" (Abrams, quoted in Booth and Booth, 1996, p. 19).

Additionally, life histories, autobiographical or biographical, testimonial, confessional, diarist, written or performed orally, have been referred to as the 'common denominator' in social science because our customary framework for analysing other is: "In what way is this person like, or unlike myself?" (Frank, 1979, p. 73). When we read or listen to an account of another's life, we compare ourselves with that representation, looking for similarities and resonances or dissimilarities, trying to make sense of that person's life and actions, and of our own. In this way, life history is a particular type of case study (see Yin, 1994; Stake, 1995), in which individuals' understandings and resolutions of a phenomenon (in this case, the study of identity construction as related to English literature) are privileged over the phenomenon itself. In other words, the truth that life-history narrators tell "can be quite different from the 'historical truth' of what happened in their lives, but nevertheless, it has a force in their attitudes and actions" (Soence, cited in Measor & Sikes, p. 224).

To achieve these ends, life history may employ narrated accounts of a life; interview data; and available documents; third party interviews; reference and comparisons to other research; and analysis in order to produce texts that are inclusive of marginalised voices, that allow for comprehensiveness reinterpretation, which are historically contextualised, and that are invitational to readers (Kouritzin, 2000). In this article, I have used written narratives as informed by documents, third-party interviews, comparisons and analysis. I have constructed a narrative that is just one account of my life, told at a particular time, in a particular location, for particular audience, with particular interest in mind, and, in this way, constituting a "briefer, more focused biography" (Smith, 1994, p. 287). Readers must also bear in mind that the experiences I divulge in this article are those that I feel are germane to this topic, and those that am prepared to make public; moreover, my use of these stories in another setting would be different. And, because we are all living in the midst of yet-to-be-completed stories in which we negotiate the boundaries between our multiple selves and our multiple ideal selves, against the backdrop of an imagined audience's multiple selves, we cannot expect any life story to be complete, rounded, final, or in any other sense finished. In other words, this story invites dissent.

More importantly, I see personal narrative and story-telling as an emancipatory approach in which we unfolded ourselves while narrating our personal and academic experience. McEwan (1997) argues that personal narratives used in research could have two functions: coercive and emancipatory. While the first is persuasive and seeks to constrain the belief, the second, is expressive and offers processes for creating new meanings. However, for the latter to be emancipatory, one should understand the context in which narratives arise. The current narratives emerged in a context of story-telling; a context was carefully crafted to fulfil an emancipatory aim. My friend and student and I through our exchange of our life stories have one key purpose of pursuing issues around our literary education and to provide intellectual and moral support to each other. This 'authentic conversation' (Florio-Runae & Clark, 1993) was a genre of social and intellectual work that was accomplished by means of story and personal narrative, and conducted in an atmosphere of safety, trust, and care between people who share a common ground and to whom it was clear that everyone in the group has something to offer and

something to learn (Rust, 2002). In this sense, our narratives would not be distorted by fear of negative consequences regarding what is said. These conversations and stories were satisfying both as ends in themselves and as means to better understanding and for providing solutions of the current situation (Rust, 2002).

Vignettes

In her justification of her choice of studying English literature, and articulating her understanding of the notion of literature, Bothaina wrote:

... Literature usually reflects the society, its ideas culture aspirations. Sometimes it appraises economic or political systems of societies, but no one can deny the fact that literature is interesting and reading literary texts is fascinating experience. I mean when I read literature I enjoy its aesthetic value, its language, imagery, metaphors. I also read it to explore other cultures. I think literature is an outlet of the nation's thought; it is a window to know how others think, especially how writers depict their nations and the circumstances around him and so on¹.

The author replied:

For me, literature is a special kind of reality; it optimises the human condition throughout history. It takes me to a synchronic and diachronic journey across time and space. During my BA and MA, it was quite possible that I lived in the texts and in several occasions, I travel in their journey and followed the trajectory they draw. Now, things have changed a lot since those earlier days.

Bothaina: *I don't care for the historical knowledge, especially when it is not related to me*

The author: *do you think that literature reflects history?*

Bothaina: *yes, but with an added point of view.*

The relationship we (Bothaina and I) have established between literature and ourselves suggests informed realisations both as political versus apolitical. The articulation of this relation as antithesis to the modernist view of literature that holds literary meanings to transcend its locality; time or space suggests perceptible resistance to the claims of universality. The relationship also enunciates a reversal conceptualisation to canonical assumptions of English literature as representative of *human conditions* (Author, (2013b). It seems that the relationship between the English Anglo-American literary canon and its readers in the post-colonial world provokes antagonist sentiments. It becomes a disclosure of the role of literature as *a critique of political and economic systems of societies* attesting a role of literature as uninterrupted critique of modernist systems (Lomba, 1998). Nonetheless, this does not deny the value of literature as *being interesting to read and as a source of enjoyment*. Outstanding the apparent antagonisms between our 'enunciations', it seems we endorse a Foucauldian's sense of literature as 'discursive practice' where *truth* about joy and critique could be bracketed (quoted in Eagleton, 1996).

Meanwhile, Bothaina's realisation of literature as an outlet of the nation's thoughts and her emphasis of the *ways* writers depict circumstances around them evince another articulation of literature as domineering '*social action*' (Eagleton, 1996), which places the idea of the universality of canonised literature under pressure. Specifically, her emphasis of the particular *ways writers depict circumstances around* them implies 'worldly' (Said, 1983) critique of the

text. To Said, the 'worldliness' of the text is located in its 'materialistic' context, its social, political, institutional, and cultural contexts. Said argues that the text is "a web of affiliations with the world" (1983, p. 106), that is, meanings are not limited to a text or its intrinsic structure (in a structuralist sense) or deferred (in poststructuralist sense), but rather are located in the materialistic world from which the text emerges. The materiality of the text for Said could be revealed through several ways: "the way in which the text becomes a monument; a cultural object sought after, fought over, possessed, rejected, or achieved in time" (Said, p, 108). Ultimately, the argument is that readers similar to Bothaina, embrace the worldliness of the text as an ongoing and engrossed concern with the materiality of the text's origin, where the reality of text itself is embedded in the very materiality of the matters of which it speaks including disposition, injustice, marginality, subjection that the hegemony and monolith of the prescribed Anglo-American canon is burdened with.

Linking this view to her remark about *literature as an outlet of the nation's thought* suggests a conceptualisation of literature as subservient to social and cultural 'beliefs' that are contingent upon locality, time, and place. It also underpins a realisation of literature that goes beyond the humanist and apolitical assumptions that literary meanings are either too personal or too universal, into more socially and culturally context-dependant meanings. Further to this, Bothaina's elaboration regarding the relationship between literature and history, *but with an added point of view* accentuates her empathetic standpoint of literature as an encompassing 'ideological apparatus' (Abu-Shomar, 2013b), wherein reality that the text imposes on the reader a set of 'culturally informed' presumptions. Arguably, such a conceptualisation reconstructs the humanist claims of The Anglo-American literary canon as an apolitical discourse of knowledge, and hence a critique of the 'authority' of Eurocentric and North American texts, or, to use Said's words "the authorial text" (1983). The authorial text, as Said puts it, the tradition of the authoritative text and its informed representational devices as well as their utilisation at post-colonial sites project strategic practices that defy the formation of discourses of resistance. Said (1978) reminds us of what he rightly calls "representational devices", the ideological incorporation and production of literary texts, has shaped discourses of power relations.

Literature, on the other hand, is negotiated as the highest type of writing which brings about ever renewed meanings wherein the relationship between the reader and the text is constructed dialogically and critically.

Bothaina wrote:

My idea of literature is that it is the highest type of writing whether it is poetry or prose. It is not direct, but always figurative and meanings are imbedded. Literature for me is a lifelong-learning process; the numberless experiences that I gained from reading different texts and even in the same text I read it over again and again because I think every time I read the text, I gain another meaning, and every reading gives me a new experience.

The author replied:

We people students of literature (or precisely, English Literature) imbibe our personal and intellectual experiences in the texts we read, or sometimes we imbibe the text in our own experiences. For me, this process of imbibing is something I call a 'survival strategy'. When I was an undergraduate student, I liked to carry the Norton Anthology of American Literature around most of the time. I thought then that this will empower me when people see me carrying

this giant book around most of the time. But funny things happen to me all the time, people think that this book is a dictionary, and for me carrying a dictionary around all the time means that I am not competent in English and I need to refer to a dictionary. Believe it, this was causing me some pain and I had to explain it to those who saw it that it is not a dictionary ... (Facebook communication).

Bothaina's acumen of literature evinces the plurality and dynamicity of 'knowledge' that could be inferred from literary texts. On the one hand, Bothaina takes up the literary discourse as different from 'ordinary language' by endorsing its figurative, indirect and embedded meanings. Although her view echoes those formalist approaches to literature, I recognise in Bothaina's comment an opinion that aims to distinguish literary meanings from scientific ones in terms of their 'objectivity'. This, on the other hand, becomes evident through her account of arriving at different meanings each time she reads the text. An identification of the literary paradigm, therefore, requires reconsideration of the subject/object relation as well as of the methods that mediate between the two while inferring literary meanings, which suggests liability of the claim of the literary text as self-defining and a unified object sufficient in itself (Easthope, 1991).

More importantly however this particular exchange of both of us touches upon our identity construction process. A process that the corpus of literature we have in mind and currently talk about has its authority upon us; it informs our epistemological perceptions and, to me, an ontological construction of how I used to perceive myself during my graduate days. During my undergraduate days, I estimated that my study of English literature would haul me up the ladder to complete social acceptance, even admiration, if I identified myself with the big anthologies of English literature. To me, doing English then was not just a mere specialisation, but also a survival strategy through which I was devoured to ingest my academic and social identity as a student of English literature. In my interpersonal relations, I created an 'imagined' class struggle that even smattering in these anthologies can provide. I rolled over everything that was *English* escaping (or reconstructing) social constitutions that are *not* English. Yet, the effect of this has been profound of what yet-to-come; I, Pygmalion-like, *performed* English literature creating my own 'theatrical realities'; between the artificiality of the imaginary world created by the text and the 'other' reality which I strived to distance myself from. The metaphoric existence abetted by the survival strategies 'empowered' me to endure the journey into graduate studies in English.

This is not a matchless experience; Bothaina's literary education, as she puts it, involves sentiments of intimacy with text, authors and characters:

I build my own meanings from the literary work and make it matching my life. When I read "Passage to India", I wrote down a quotation I always use it in my life: [life never gives us what we want at the moment we consider appropriate]/ I always search for something like that to help me in my life.... When I read Pamela by Richardson, every time I want just put the novel aside and start with another material but I can't really leave it because I find in the character of Pamela a similarity between her and myself... In "Sense and Sensibility", the daughters Eleanor and Marian in the way of their thinking, I compare myself and my elder sister, I compare how she has more sense than I; I tend to be more emotional. The novel taught me how to be patient and to recognise things logically for instance...Even the myths of antiquity, "The Midair" by Euripides, if you take some quotations they are applied to our lives. I always take some quotation and give to my sister and say: 'Oh my God, even though we have quarrel between Jason and his

wife we still listen to the same words to the same way of quarrelling between any husband and his wife, so you can't call it just reflecting the Greek civilisation; it is just universal (Facebook communication).

The internalisation of literary meanings becomes a salient feature of Bothaina's discourse and narratives; literature, or more precisely, canonised literary texts, and held as an 'educator' that has significant bearings on readers' personal lives. In her narratives, Bothaina seeks identifying meanings in literary texts she studied through which she could identify herself with, or in Kouritzin's (2004) words, reflecting on her undergraduate literary experience: "I learned to identify with statements made by people at different points in history from different social classes... I thought I learned to be a humanist. I thought I 'understood' something deeper and more powerful than my life" (p. 191). Within such phrases, I realise Bothaina's responses an evocation of literary meanings, through which she transforms into her own or she is transformed by these meanings or both. Therefore, students of English who share the power and passion of literary meanings in "the moment of shared insight, in the moments when both [sensual] and intimate thoughts and ideas are formed and given birth, it is so tempting to fuse ... [Forster's "*life never gives us what we want at the moment we consider appropriate*"] with someone younger who flails and flames more strongly than ourselves and thus find immortality" (p. 206). I recognise these responses in the words of an educator's privileged position saying: "my students will do anything for me, to see what I see, and to know what I know" (*ibid*, p. 206). But others would read Forster's remark "*life never gives...*" differently. For example, Buzard (1988) reads this line as expressing "Adela Quested's desire to see the 'real India' [which] carries sexual overtones reminiscent of those found in Lucy Honeychurch's situation, and it brings her into a contact with the alien that takes the form of another projected, liberating rape (which, like other Forster heroines, she both desires and fears). She flees madly through some cactus – a detail that has immediate and familiar results, for it allows Forster to linger over the vision of her body as it lies tortured by a thousand penetrations" (p. 176).

Bothaina's experience of reading literature in this 'particular' passionate way is similar to most of the students I worked with. Remarks such as *I live literature, I'm fond of literature, and I'm passionate about literature* are recurrent phrases in the students' discourses, especially female ones I have taught. Although Bothaina's reflections could be argued from several perspectives, I take up the argument that although these reflections demonstrate resistance to canonical ideological assumptions, in ways they tend to take on new subjectivities and positionalities they appear to 'imbibe' the 'norms' and values associated with canonical textual meanings (Zubair, 2006). This is to suggest that the students' exposure to English literature underpins what Hall (2005) calls the emergence of 'literature as social practice', where students are viewed as social agents who turn to literature to help them in larger purposes in life, such as reflecting on their identities and possibilities for moral and emotional engagements. However, following such an approach within the repertoire of post-colonial theory and feminist pedagogy (these responses are mostly evident in the female students' reflections), where students identify themselves with imaginary characters in literary texts at this particular time of their life, raises the issue of the hegemonic and dominant assumptions regarding the representativeness of the English literary canon. For students to be evoked by canonical authors from different times and sensibilities is what underlies the power of the canon to 'naturalise' and 'legitimise' subordinates' sentiments through a process of 'interpellation' (Ashcroft *et al.*, 2000) where those subjects are constructed by particular ideological and discursive operations.

In fact, our narratives regarding English literature covers multitude of topics and is stretched out in several directions; what might be identified as ‘approaching the literary text’ is another salient topic we discoursed. Two different approaches to the literary texts could be identified in terms of how we negotiated the cultural constructs of these texts. On the one hand, the beauty of the literary discourse is prioritised in terms of its metaphorical, aesthetic and artistic aspects. Valuing these aspects is rationalised on the basis that literature is an elevated human discourse, and that its value should not be reduced to its cultural meanings. In other words, textual meanings are internalised as universal truths surpassing their localities, political and ideological assumptions both diachronically and synchronically; timeless Hellenistic meanings transcending time and space. In our dialogue (or, probably, contesting argument) I realise how Bothaina’s narratives could demonstrate remarkable tolerance for textual meanings that (mis)represent the lives of ‘Other’ groups of people, or cultures (loosely defined). Within this tradition of interpreting English literatures, one would exhibit accentuated *tolerance* to ‘cultural’ constructs these texts are burdened with, and, the result is espousing these texts as a source of wisdom and universal moral values (AbuHilal & Abu-Shomar, 2014).

Nonetheless, and coming from an ‘ideological’ perspective, I would contest with these assumptions. Ascribing to post-colonial discourse, I have become sensitive to textual ‘cultural’ representations, and thus cannot simply conform to textual aesthetic aspects when cultural constructs are at stake.

Bothaina wrote:

You know literary works are beautiful. The music, intonation, and metaphor are beautiful elements. The style writers use is elevated and more beautiful than any other discourse; when reading literature, I feel overwhelmed. After all, I believe that art is for learning. When I read literature, I always read between lines so that I can analyse the text on the basis of the psychology of the writer; what’s his position. I try to find positive ideas that help me to get through the text. For instance, when I read a text that misrepresents our culture, I should ask myself ‘why?’ before judging that text. While others may misjudge or undervalue that text, I think this it is unfair to deal with literature like this.

Whether to take up literature as a piece of art, enjoying its language, metaphors, and aesthetic value or to reconsider literary texts in terms of their cultural constructs was a topic we discussed in our reflections on the possible ways to approach the text. In her narrative, Bothaina embraces literary language, images, music, and etc. It is tempting to interpret such an attitude as an idealisation of the aesthetic value of literature in a modernist sense, hence, apolitical and humanist approaches to literature. However, in my reading Bothaina’s accounts, I recognise several dialogic elements in the ways her relationship with the text is constructed. First, Bothaina adopts a dialogic interaction with the text in the ways she transcends dualistic and dichotomous oppositions into assuming the right for textual meanings as an ‘Other’ having the right to be voiced, represented, and acknowledged. She gives equal, ‘dialogical attention’ (Author, 2013c) to her own voice and the voice of the text; such a mode of textual interaction promotes a critical reflection on the process of ‘difference’ exploration. Therefore, readers’ subject positions become ‘double-voiced’ or ‘constructing the “self” in relation’ instead of ‘single-voiced’ or expressing ‘adherence of the ‘self’ viewpoint’ while realising textual ideas (Dunlop, 1999). Thus, in their search for an understanding of the writers’ psychology and position, dialogic

readers such as Bothaina would attain for an exchange of voices rather than offering antithesis to a given thesis or an answer to a proposed question (Bialostosky, 1986).

Second, Bothaina's search for elements *in* and *beyond* the text registers another dialogical element in terms discovering the experience of the cultural context *behind* the text that gives the words their validity and meaning, through which she could explore the 'borderland' of the 'self' and the 'other' represented by textual meanings (Moore, 1994). Therefore, acknowledging the psychological and cultural positions of textual ideas enables 'third-space positioning' which surpasses dialectic binaries into a 'multi-dimensional' field that transcends and infuses the text in such a way readers get through a complex process of cultural exchange instead of binary absorption between the 'self' and the 'other' where 'culture' operates outside the exchange since the aim turns into 'dialogic survival' rather than 'dialectic synthesis' (Dunlop, 1999). Third, the primacy of context and the impossibility of textual resolution are implied in Bothaina's approach to valuing the text. This appears not only in her search for wider contextual elements, but also in the ways she understands and evaluates the text in terms of these elements. She gains deeper knowledge about textual background and practices critical reflexivity, which appears in her remark *I should ask myself 'why'*. Islam participates in a genre of dialogic reading that shifts into not only a participatory epistemology, but also contextual exchange. As such, the reader and the text turn into dialogic interlocutors where readers and ideas could discover mutual oppositions and affinities.

The author replied:

I may belong to those people who read while issues of textual representations (or more precisely, misrepresentations) are always in the backdrop of their minds. When I realise that there is something insulting about Islam and the group of people whom I belong to, I develop negative position to the text. If for example I see something insulting Islam, this affects all my reading of the text, for example, I read Frankenstein which is completely far from issues related to cultural representation, you know, it is a horror story about a monster..., but in chapter 14, I spotted an insult to our prophet Muhammad, so this affected my reception of the novel, and would build my whole reading on this particular issue. Unfortunately, the canon we study is loaded with such misrepresentations.

It goes without saying that sensitivity to cultural misrepresentations is most expected from a scholar whose area of expertise is post-colonial and cultural studies. Adopting the tradition of cultural criticism, the work of scholars such as Said (1994) Boehmer (2005), Loomba (2005), Viswanathan (1987) and Mukherjee (1995) would primarily put under scrutiny issues of cultural representation. These scholars among many others have produced a huge corpus of literary criticism whose main focus is cultural and political criticism. In this line of thought, I have consciously or unconsciously developed a particular reading of the text, one that accentuates the cultural aspects of the literary texts as a key issue in textual value-judgment, which impedes 'objective' reading of the text. Juxtaposing the two positions, Bothaina's and mine, of how we come to read and value the text, each may represent a discrete case. Whereas, Bothaina's approach embodies the case of a dialogic reader, mine articulates what Eagleton (1996) calls 'unconscious consensus valuation' that underlies social 'ideologies' in literary value judgement. Ideology in taking up or rejecting the work, according to Eagleton, is not simply what is entrenched as unconscious beliefs that people hold, it is however those modes of feelings, valuing, perceiving and believing which have *some* kind of relation to social power.

Therefore it becomes the strong ties of cultural and social commitment that calls readers, like myself, to give prominence to an ideological critique of the text. It is however worth emphasising that this interpretation is not an argument against ideological positions, but rather, an argument which stresses the need to reconsider textual misrepresentations of the culture of the 'Other' in terms of the ways they are approached in the literatures classroom.

Furthermore, when the line between personal and professional attitudes of the text becomes blurring, any apolitical or 'objective' reading of literature would be not possible.

The author wrote:

I think literary discourse is different from any other in terms of how it constructs its own reality and representation of the human condition. We need to be objective in the discourse of science disciplines, say medical or engineering, but objectivity in the way we consider literary discourse is quite not possible. This is because when we read literature we understand it in our own ways, there is culture involved and our own ideas are reflected on what we read. So, if you seek objectivity, it is not what literature is, it is an experience that is understood by our own judgement and the involvement of our own culture, ideas, personality with what we read.

The claim is cultural and personal involvement while reading literary texts can lead to attaining a multiplicity of textual interpretations. It could also be recognised as an alternative participatory and resistant approach working against universalistic conceptual frameworks that call for monolithic and homogenising approaches to understanding literary meanings. I realise this position as a resisting one to 'aesthetic universalism' that ignores the particular, different, and other culturally specific modes and codes of reading the text (Moore, 1994). This position also suggests that meanings cannot reside in the text, but are transient and create a 'temporary retrospective fixing' (Derrida, 1994). I recognise in this approach a different reality created by a different set of relationships with the text, where variability of the possible textual meanings can be made in relation to particular cultural and personal involvement with that text. Therefore, apolitical and objective approaches where the reader is fully complicit in the textual assumptions are not what literature should be. Instead literature is the experience one understands through personal and cultural engagement.

In addition to our discussion or narratives regarding the English literary canon we studied, we also rambled to talk about how the majority of professors of English literature disseminate these literatures to their students. Recalling our undergraduate literary education, our reflections on the institutional practices seem to move around one major theme that could be encapsulated in Kouritzin's (2004) evocation of her (Literature 12) teacher's statement: "I am the teacher and you are the students. I know something and you know nothing. I am going to give that knowledge to you" (p. 190). During those times, our deep down feelings of lacking knowledge and inability to read and interpret literary texts is augmented by our instructors' practices and statements regarding the ways a literary text should be approached..

In the following passage, Bothaina recalls how she used to put her faith in on her instructor's opinion and perceives herself as unable to *understand* literary texts and hence not in a position to provide a point of view of literature:

I think we were not in the position to say our point of view of literature because we didn't have enough experience about literature ... I read 'Young Goodman Brown' five times and I couldn't

understand it until my doctor told me it is about the puritans. I said in myself, yea, what would happen to me, if my doctor didn't tell me what the idea is, how can I know by myself?

I recognise Bothaina's reflections on her undergraduate literary education not only a position of powerless and marginalised learner in a system regimented in power relations, but also a conformity and assimilation of this position. During her undergraduate stage of studying a prescribed literary canon, she was made to believe that she lacks experience, knowledge, and ability to read and understand literature. This response in particular indicates that Bothaina and students alike are made to believe that the text holds a particular interpretation and thus one 'truth', which is waiting for an authorised professor to decipher and approve. Therefore, she does not know *what would happen to her if her doctor did not tell her that 'Young Goodman Brown' is about Puritans*. Such faith in her doctor's 'authorised' interpretation raises an issue of the legitimacy of 'knowledge' that suppresses the learners' voice. I recognise this claim to gain more validity when considering her analogy of doing literature in the following quote:

I read a story about a man who is very naïve, he is from the countryside and who is going to the city to his cousin, to work there, to get money, to get knowledge, to get something new, but he remains naïve, people always mock him during his journey. I think at [...] University we are like this we are always affected by this statement said by our professors when they enter the classroom and they put the novel on the table and say "this is the masterpiece". So, what is the effect of these words on us, I think that I have no choice for myself to say that's a good or bad text.

Probably, this passage could tighten the claim that an institutional 'culture' in the current context not only perpetuates the canon as an 'authorised' source of knowledge, but also disseminates and propagates this 'appropriate' knowledge in the ways it encourages students to absorb a perception of themselves as *naïve* and unable to learn on their own. Yet, Bothaina realises how her educational experience turns her into a *naïve* seeker of knowledge and she challenges the assumptions that knowledge is a 'thing' a 'product' that is transformed into learners' minds (Gilbert, 2005). Further to this, I understand his comment on his doctors' behaviour towards the selection of certain texts as *'this is the masterpiece'* in Foucault's (1983) words when warning against educational ideological apparatus and its distribution of knowledge, in what it permits and what it prevents. The students' reflections on their literary education imply that educational systems are political systems that maintain or modify the appropriation of particular discourses, with the knowledge and the powers that carries them (ibid). In fact Bothaina's evocation and narrative indicates a discourse of resistance and challenge to this institutional tradition. Recalling this experience from the past and introducing it as such now, she seems no longer complicit to such a tradition.

Last in our narratives, we sought to challenge this hegemonic institutional 'culture'. In one of her messages, Bothaina, challenges Shakespeare's location as a key figure in the students' literature programme:

We have a course called 'Shakespeare and the Renaissance', the word 'Renaissance' may refer to all literatures at that time, let's say it was a movement throughout Europe. Can we say that literature was only British during that time? Shakespeare is the only figure we studied and if they replaced one of his plays, they choose another of Shakespeare himself. So we ended up learning Shakespeare, not the Renaissance or any other literatures in the world.

This reflection of Bothaina registers some signs of challenge to the ways her literary education is perpetuated and nurtured in ‘authoritative’ and persona of a canonised syllabus. On the one hand, it points out that the literary tradition adopted in her programme revolves around certain literary figures who are located as key authors in the English literary canon where Shakespeare is positioned on the top of those figures. This emphasises that “the study of English literature, as traditionally conceived in high schools and universities, reinforces Eurocentrism, racism, [... and] elitism” (Kouritzin, 2004, p. 185). On the other hand, her response is suggestive of the ways the students realise their education as ‘an object of unquestioning reverence’ and as “a set of lived experiences and social practices developed within asymmetrical relations of power” (Bourdieu quoted in Giroux, 1992), which they feel a need to encounter. As such, these reflections on our literary education suggest a realisation of the ways this system holds the tradition of teaching English literature that ostensibly concern British persona, locations, cultures, and history as the best in art as the lasting values are those of the Englishman (McLeod, 2000).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have presented some critique of a prescribed literary syllabus by means of using a radical methodology of storytelling and narrative protocols. We know the power of literature especially for passionate learners that a bond of intimate relation is so easily confused with identity construction; of what we love and hate. In the moments of shared insights, we realise how our literary education with its nurturing, enveloping power and involvement with our subject-positions is both monolithic and hegemonic. When intimate thoughts and ideas are formed and given birth, it is so tempting to fuse in the imaginative realities of literary texts with passionate students flail and flame more that our personality to reconcile their agony and love of English literature.

In addition to offering a critique of canonicity, the paper contributes to a wider cultural debate by addressing and articulating the relationship between literature, culture, and education. It also raises educators’ critical awareness of cultural diversity, identity, and ‘self’ representation. Furthermore, it contributes to theory and research practice through its engagement and utilisation of radical critical research methodology. Through our dialogic narrative and personal engagements with our literary education, we enable a ‘Pedagogy of Tolerance’ that constitutes sites for both resistance and better understanding of the ‘self’s’ and ‘other’s’ authority over meanings. Additionally, this engagement provides an opportunity for students of English literature to examine and voice their opinions of various cultural constructions.

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