

THE RECEPTION OF AMERICAN LITERATURE IN JORDAN

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ABSTRACT

It is argued by many scholars in the Arab World that American literature, being impacted by the policies of the US, has been struggling for acceptance and recognition in the curriculum of English departments of several private and public universities. Deeply affected by the East-West relationship marked by conflict and confrontation, this literature has been having trouble with carving out a place for itself, and becoming a literary tradition on its own.

Our discussion demonstrates the problems posed by the engagement of the West (America included) with the Middle East region. This situation has made it difficult for American literature (as a product of Western culture) to secure a place in the curriculum of English departments. By the same token, the process of teaching American literature in the Arab World, unlike English literature, has failed to become an established academic tradition in its own right, and, thus, it is not only related to dual policies of the US. There are other objectives and motives that are not purely in the academic tradition that negatively influence the teaching of American literature.

This way, American literature has lost most of its battles to carve out a place in English departments in Jordan, a country neighboring Iraq and Palestine that both have suffered from the US policy consequences. Whereas the first is ravaged by the US military force; the second is ravaged by the US political involvement. Unless these policies change and become balanced, the place of American literature won't change for the better, and it'll continue to be as it has so far been, just a very minor part of the English department literary tradition. Albeit, what we would like to see in the near future is the development of English departments on American literature. We, on the other hand, welcome the development of American literature, but US policies limit the geography of this literature outside the country that has produced it.

Key words: American literature, English literature, Jordanian universities, The Hashemite University

The place of American literature in the English curriculum of Jordanian universities cannot be treated in isolation from the Western, thus becoming a tradition engagement with the Middle East region. Going on for over 1,400 years, this engagement began with the Crusaders' attempt (1095-1291) to bring Christianity to the Holy Land, and continued for three centuries running from the eleventh to the thirteenth century. From the fourteenth to the seventeenth century, the Ottoman Empire reversed this order by besieging Vienna, but its decline in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries paved the way for France, Italy and Britain to establish their control over North Africa and the Middle East. Lasting for centuries, this engagement has been characterizing the relationship between the West and Middle East countries, and, thus, it has been blamed for the creation of a good number of problems that weigh on not only the region countries, but also their citizens who have been unable to lead normal lives and enjoy their human rights the same way their Western counterparts have been doing.

Driven by their interests, Western countries have been disregarding the interests of the region's peoples. To take an example, during the First World War, Arab nations, Antonios argues in *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement*, "allied themselves with the British and the French and revolted against the Ottomans and helped put an end to an empire which has lasted for more than four centuries". (1)

After the end of the War, Arab nations felt disappointed due to their being denied, Said claims in *Culture and Imperialism*, the British-promised independence they took "as the literal truth". (2)

They also realized that the European victors had drawn up other plans for their countries. Motivated by their interests which, Alkadry holds in *"Colonialism in a Postmodern Age"*, "have been at odds with the national and public interests of the Arab peoples" (3), the British and French leaders at the San Remo conference, held in 1920, changed the geography of the region. Violating the "general principles proclaimed and the specific promises made by the Allies...particularly by Britain," these leaders decided

that "the whole of Arab Rectangle lying between the Mediterranean and the Persian frontier [be] placed under mandatory rule". (4) Whereas British leaders broke the promises made to Arab leaders, they fulfilled their promises to Zionists in the "Balfour Declaration," which gave them the chance to establish a Jewish state in Palestine. It is ironic that the British leaders who have perpetrated this endeavor hold themselves to be superior to others and blameless. It is equally ironic that British leaders have given something they do not really own to a group of people morally undeserving of owning it.

In the late nineteenth century, Jews accounted for, Alkadry maintains, "Less than 10% of the population of Palestine". (5) Similarly, Edward Said contends, in *The Question of Palestine*, that by the 1930, Jews "accounted for almost one-third of the population of Palestine". (6)

Despite their small number, Jews were empowered by the British forces of occupation to force Arab inhabitants to evacuate the land of Palestine. In this way, they were enabled to establish a national home at the expense of displacing others, the Palestinians. Realizing that Zionism was, as Kimmerling and Migdal argue in *Palestinians: The Making of People*, part and parcel of "Western imperialism in the Middle East, and only the eradication of the latter could halt the advance of the former" (p.9), Palestinians resorted to revolt, but the attempt had not much success because the West (the US and Europe included) was supporting Israel created mostly, Said argues, "by settlers who [had been actively working] to expunge Palestinian natives from their homeland," a fact which triggered a major struggle that will certainly "last for decades to come". (7)

As far as support for Israel is concerned, this support has been both direct and unconditional. Since the 1990s, the US has been using its Veto right in the Security Council to obliterate any resolution against Israel, and prevent international observers from protecting Palestinian human rights.

The US has been also keen on supplying Israel with weapons, justifying its wars on the Arab World and taking sides with it despite its flagrant violation of the UN resolutions. Blinded by political prejudice, the US demands that the Arab countries, especially Syria and Libya, comply with these resolutions, which are unjust and unjustified. At present, the US claims that it is supporting efforts toward peace in the Middle East and toward establishing a viable Palestinian state. Taking advantage of its status as an influential international go-between, it is offering Israel great help by turning a blind eye and deaf ear to settlement building, which undermines the peace process in its entirety, rendering peace talks futile.

As regards the rationale for this somewhat biased support, the US believes that Israel has the right to exist, and that it is a duty to help the Israelis enjoy this right. Another reason for this support is probably Americans' subscribing uncritically to the notion that Islam is a religion of tyranny, and that it fosters oppression, terrorism and hatred of others. It is interesting to note that Americans' engagement with the Arabs and Muslims dates back, as Obeidat argues in "On Non-Native Grounds: The Place of American Literature in the English Curriculum of Arab World Universities," "to the Barbary Wars (1785-1815), which were actually the first immediate encounter between the region and the emerging American republic, and the "Barbary Pirates" affair virtually sums up what the Arabs knew most about the United States of America, and, in turn, what America knew about the Arab East until the 1970s, the Arab-Israeli Wars, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, and the Gulf War". (8) Drawing upon stereotypes, Americans inherited, Robert Allison argues in *The Crescent Obscured*, this image of Islam as a religion of tyranny from Christian Europe. (9) Commenting on these negative images of Islam and the Arabs, Edward Said suggests, in *The Question of Palestine*, that the Zionists have taken it upon themselves to explain the Oriental Arab to the West, to assume responsibility for expressing what the Arabs and Palestinians were like. (10) Unaware whether this image is accurate or not, Americans have been limiting themselves to employing it as it is. (For more information on the negative images of Arabs and Muslims, see M. Obeidat's *American literature and Orientalism*, Shaheen's *Reel Bad Arabs*, and Said's *Covering Islam*).

While Americans do not seem to care about the negative images of Muslims and the Arabs, they are preoccupied with Islam and Islamists for political, economic and security reasons. Acting upon the reservoir of commonly negative stereotypes that are perpetuated and reinforced by the mass media, and that play a great role in, Allison maintains in *The Crescent Obscured*, "the making of US Policy toward Arab and Muslim states" (11), America, under the pre text of fighting terror and civilizing others, has chosen to invade Iraq and Afghanistan and destroy them in the name of wiping out oppression and passing democracy on to both of them. This choice made by America is also ascribed to implicit reasons of which fighting Islam is implicitly equated with terrorism, fighting the Arabs and Muslims on behalf of Israel is another, and securing its interests vis-a-vis Islam that represents a threat is a third reason. In truth, Americans harbor fear of Islam and Arabs, and also have misgivings about Muslims and Arabs' mixing politics and religion, a practice that runs counter to America's liberal tradition based on the separation between the church and the state. Arguing in support of this harbored fear, Edward Said contends, in *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, that "there is a consensus on "Islam" as a kind of scapegoat for everything we do not happen to like about the world's

new political, social and economic patterns. For the right, Islam represents barbarism; for the left, medieval theocracy; for the center, a kind of distasteful exoticism". (12)

This argument clarifies the United States' claim that it has been planning to democratize the Middle East assuming that the Arabs are helpless to practice democracy on their own which, Michael Rubin holds, in "Is the West Racist Toward Muslims and Arabs?," is unlikely to take root "in the Arab World and majority Muslim nations". (13) This unfavorable image of the Arabs and Muslims shows, in a way, the contempt with which Westerners treat them. These Westerners are not in a better position. Arabs as well as Muslims equally view them from this perspective, holding the West, Obeidat contends in "On Non-Native Grounds: the Place of American Literature in the English Curriculum of Arab World Universities" "to be" an alien, foreign, confrontational alternative world". (14) Rami Khouri, likewise, argues, "The common perception across the Middle East is that Western powers for two centuries have routinely used their diplomatic power and sent their armies to occupy our lands, remove nationalist or anti-Western regimes they dislike, preserve conservative regimes and dictators they are comfortable with, maintain access to oil, or ensure Israel's superiority over all neighboring countries". (15) Underlining the western powers' perceptions of the Orient, Said maintains that these powers are colonial and regard the colonized people to be "naturally subservient to a superior, advanced, developed and morally mature [power]". (16) Bearing these Western powers' evil ends in mind, it can be argued that they won't be loved, admired and glorified for this matter. These powers' cruelties bear upon others and their perceptions. The latest cruelty is the US political and military involvement in Iraq and Palestine which, Shafeeq N.Ghabra claims in "The Tension between East and West," "[undermines] its credibility and negates the good it [has done] in helping resolve the conflicts in Kuwait, Bosnia, and Kosovo". (17)

It is in this credibility-lacking context that American literature is losing most of its battles in English departments in Jordan. Some scholars, such as Monroe, Asfour and Dahiyat argue against teaching it on the grounds that many of "the cultural and social values embodied in the English literary tradition" are "alien, and, at length, opposed to the moral values held by Muslim Arab students". (18) Other scholars, such as Zughol, similarly, object to teaching it because it teems with "racist, reductionist, prejudiced, and hostile views of our own". (19) In another article, written in 1986, Zughoul claimed that literature classes did not develop students' competence in speaking English because of the hiatus between the literary and everyday language. (20) Responding to Zughol's article, both Obeidat and John stress the value of teaching literature. Arguing in "Language Versus Literature in University English Departments," John contends that literature is useful because it exposes students to "such phenomena as idioms, connotative meaning, semantic relations and complex syntax". (21)

Reiterating John's argument, Obeidat suggests, in "Language Versus Literature in English Departments in the Arab World," that literature exposes students to "language at its best". (22) In addition to differing over the inclusion or exclusion of literature, some academicians and scholars of English differ over the way of teaching American literature, and raise the following questions: How do we teach "a nonnative literary text in the first place? Do we teach its history and background, or do we simply teach the literary text itself (the words on the page)? Do we need to teach it as something else may be-- the text as language, for example?". (23)

All these questions are justified and worthy of being discussed. It is true that American literature involves negative images of the Arabs and Muslims. It is also true that this literature represents a culture that has been supporting others solely responsible for usurping the Arab territories in Palestine. However, this literature is worth exploring to know about the Americans' mindset bent on holding the Arabs and Muslims to be not only subordinates and adversaries, but also stumbling blocks to civilization.

In line with this contention, it becomes quite evident to understand the call of Americanists and scholars' of American literature in Jordan, in the 2nd half of the twentieth century, for offering, Obeidat claims in "On Nonnative Grounds: the Place of American Literature in the English Curriculum of Arab World Universities," "undergraduate classes in American literature, and for teaching it as part of the English program". (24) Responding to this call, the English Department of the University of Jordan, established in the early 1960s, offered an undergraduate course entitled "American Literature to the Twentieth Century." From the title of this course, it is understood that it is a survey course that focuses on representative authors such as Franklin, Bryant, Irving, Hawthorne, Poe, Emerson, Melville, Thoreau and Twain-- to mention only a few names. In addition to that, it also focuses on periods and genres. This is exactly what the professor did. The department also offered courses on English literature. These courses were English Literature I, English Literature II, Special Subject (Metaphysical Poets), English Literature (Chaucer to Spenser), English Literature (Milton to Dryden), Special Subject (Eighteenth Century), Literary Criticism, Western Civilization, English Literature (The Romantic Period), Shakespeare and Special Subject (The Victorian Period). This number of courses of which each lasted for over two semesters provides an indication that English literature had already established a firm footing in the curriculum in the early 1960s.

The situation at the Hashemite University, where we teach, is nearly the same. The total of credit hours in the study plan of the B.A. degree in English is 132, of which fifty-seven credits are departmental requirements, and twenty-four credits are electives. The remaining credits are faculty and university requirements. In this study plan, there is only one course entitled "American Literature?" As the course title suggests, this is a survey course that is expected to focus on the various genres of American literature, representative authors, and different periods and trends. In a course of this nature, it is left to the instructor to choose the course materials and the approach. Next to this course, there are other courses on English literature, such as English Literature from the Beginnings up to 1660, English Literature from 1660 to 1798 and Shakespeare. In addition to these courses, there are also others that are, one may say, partially based on the English literary tradition, such as the "Short Story,"

"Introduction to Drama" and "Introduction to the Novel". In courses such as these, the instructor may include American authors in the syllabus. It's all up to him or her.

Parallel to this situation is the one at AL-il-Bayt University, a state-funded University. At this University, the study plan of the B.A. degree in English Language and Literature includes just one course titled "American Literature." As I have already argued, a course of this nature focuses on representative authors, literary genres, and periods. While the department offers only a course on American literature, it offers other courses entitled "English Literature," "Novel," and "Drama." Similar to this department is the one at the College of Educational Sciences and Arts funded by the UNRWA. The English Department here offers a single American literature course, which echoes the courses at AL-il-Bayt and the Hashemite Universities in its nature as a survey course, which poses problems for the instructor related to the material to be taught, and the way to teach it to students whose performance is poor. Students of this sort cannot move beyond the stage of reading. They have trouble with reading and understanding what they read. Such poor students won't be able to appreciate literature.

Appreciating literature is also a problem facing students at Jadara University whose English Department offers two compulsory courses on American literature. These courses are "Introduction to American Literature," and "American Twentieth-Century Novel." While the first course deals with the beginnings of American literature and the development of an American character in the works of a few American writers, the second concentrates on the twentieth-century American novelists, such as Theodore Dreiser, Henry James, Sherwood Anderson, Edith Wharton, Jack London, John Steinbeck, Richard Wright, Eudora Welty, Bernard Malamud, Ralph Ellison, as examples. But there are other courses on English literature, such as Introduction to English Literature, English Drama in the Twentieth Century, English Novel in the Twentieth Century, Shakespeare, and English Poetry from the Beginning up to 1718, English Poetry from the Romantic Period to the Present, and Literary Criticism. It is worth noting here that the study plan for the B.A. degree in English at Jadara University seems to be similar to that offered at Amman Private University where the English Department also offers two courses entitled "American Literature from the Beginning to the Civil War," and "Modern American Literature." The department here also offers English courses, such as English Literature up to 1660, English Literature in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries, English Literature in the Romantic and Victorian Periods, and English Literature in the Renaissance and the Medieval Period. While the first course focuses on early American literature represented by Franklin, Irving, Charles B. Brown, James Cooper and traces the development of this literature up to the Civil War (1866), the second concentrates on the modern period represented by Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Edwin A. Robinson, William Carlos Williams, Scott Fitzgerald, Henry James, Flannery O'Connor, Zora Neale Hurston, to mention just a few names.

Unlike Jadara University and Amman Private University, the Applied Sciences University offers one course entitled "American Literature" and eleven other courses on English literature. The course on American literature is broad and general in scope. It is basically a survey course. The other courses on English literature vary in terms of their content, themes and scope. These courses are Introduction to English Literature, Novel, Poetry, Drama, Shakespeare, English Literature to 1603, The Seventeenth-Century English Literature, Eighteenth-Century English Literature, Nineteenth-Century English Literature, Twentieth-Century English Literature, and Short Story. Like this university, Zarqa Private University also offers a single course on American literature as well as a number of other courses on English literature. Entitled "American Literature," this course is both broad and general in nature. The instructor of this course shoulders the responsibility of choosing the appropriate course material and methods of instruction. Regarding the courses on English literature, they are as follows: Introduction to English Literature, Drama, Novel (1), English Literature up to 1660, English Literature 1660-1798, Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Age, Poetry, The Nineteenth-Century English Literature, Twentieth-Century English Literature, Literary Criticism, Novel (2) (Optional), and Special Topic in English Literature.

Unlike Zarqa University, Al-Hussein Bin Talal University, a state-funded university in Ma'an, offers students majoring in English a number of courses including English and American literatures. These

courses are English and American Literatures from the Beginnings to 1800, English and American Novel, English and American Drama, and English and American Literatures 1800-the Present. In courses of this sort, the instructor should maintain a balance between English and American elements. In the first course for instance, he/she may divide the semester into two halves of which each half is devoted either to English or American literature up to 1800. Only this way can he/she do both literatures justice. Another difficulty connected with courses of this sort is that they call for preparation simply because instructors can either major in English or American literature per se. As long as instructors cannot major in both areas, they should prepare themselves for classes in order not to bungle their job.

In stark contrast with the preceding Universities are Muata University, Middle East University, Arab Open University, Zaitouna University of Jordan, and The Jordan University for Science and Technology, Balqa University for Applied Science, The Jordanian German University, and Princess Sumaya University for Technology. These Universities are alike in that they offer English classes, but no American literature classes per se. This situation is not a coincidence; it is ascribed to a number of reasons. The first, in our judgment, is the ongoing acrimonious debate in English departments regarding the merits of literature and its role in the university curriculum. Until relatively recently, there are people who are still denied the joys of literature. They are too fastidious to learn literature and appreciate its content. In this capacity, these people object to offering literature classes. These people themselves may feel sometimes ashamed of their colleagues who are Americanists, and, therefore, approve of offering a course or so on American literature, intending to push it to the furthest possible margins of the curriculum. When asked about their views, they claim that there are many courses on English literature, and that will do. This argument in itself constitutes the second reason underlying American literature's failure to secure a place in the English curriculum. And it shows that American literature is still thought of as being part of the English literary tradition, that it is unimportant, and that it is inferior to English literature as a field of academic study. Confirming this inferiority, Jay B. Hubbell, the editor of *American Literature*, a leading scholarly journal in its field, claimed in its 1929 premier issue that "our authors have produced a body of writing ... [which] does not rival the great literatures of the Old World in artistic value". (25) Like Hubbell, Howard Mumford Jones granted that the "superior richness of British literature is undeniable". (26) Following Hubbell and Jones's footsteps, Edwin Greenlaw, an influential scholar in charge of the English studies at Hopkins, argued that American literature was inferior to English in age, complexity, philosophy, and greatness. (27) The third reason for this inferiority of American literature is the US anti-Americanism policy (28) in the Middle East which has been giving rise to a host of cultural and political problems turning the region's peoples' lives into misery. All these problems could have been solved had the US not supported Israel, struck balance in its relationship with Israel on the one hand and Arabs on the other maintained its credibility, done Arabs justice, and been keen on treating Jews and Arabs as equals. As long as the US has been maintaining the same policy, this stance will certainly bear upon its culture and literature beyond its borders. It is this policy that stifles the development of English departments on American literature. We hope to see this sort of development happening, but, unfortunately, the US policy limits the geography of this literature overseas.

The aforementioned study plans of English language and literature at a number of Universities in Jordan reveal little interest in American literature and culture, and reflect the disregard of some English departments of this literature replete with negative images of Arabs and Muslims. At quite a few Universities, American literature is still offered as part of the general course on English literature, which raises the question of identity and recognition and their being lacking. This situation is also true of the Universities that offer no courses on American literature and culture, where American literature is offered as a survey course which poses problems for instructors who are likely to have trouble with what to be included and what to be excluded. These study plans also demonstrate that American literature has been receiving minimal attention in contrast with English literature, which has already established a firm footing in the curriculum of English departments.

NOTES

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