

Islam, Islamophobia and Identity Formation: A New Pedagogical Approach

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ABSTRACT

In a world full of cultural plurality and religious dialogue, Literature, as a crucial medium offers a powerful lens for examining perceptions of Islam and Muslim identities. Conventionally, literary texts dealing with Islamic themes and Muslim identities are being taught/ discussed under the reflection of Eurocentric perspectives, driven by colonial ideology and orientalist frameworks where race, culture and geo-political dynamic play a crucial role. These approaches often perpetuated stereotypes, portraying Islam as monolithic and the Muslims as the marginalized “Other”. This paper explores the intersection of Islam, Islamophobia and identity formation through viewpoint of cultural studies, focusing on how literary texts shape and challenge prevailing perceptions about the Islamophobia and the critical process of identity negotiation in postcolonial context. This study also reimagines how decolonial pedagogical approach of teaching helps in fostering a critical and inclusive classroom environment. Educators need to integrate such methods which incorporate cultural awareness, critical thinking, empathy and moving beyond simplistic binaries among students. Through an analysis of selective literary works, this paper emphasizes that complex and multifaceted Muslim identities are shaped by cultural hybridity, migration and resistance against prejudice and learners today should learn to deconstruct orientalist depictions in revealing the socio cultural roots of Islamophobia whereas they should engage themselves with the eclectic narratives of resilience, agency, and self-representation. Ultimately, this paper advocates for integrating such texts and methods into curricula to decolonize literary studies, promote inclusivity, and prepare learners to navigate conscientiously with universal issues of faith, identity, and power in an increasingly interconnected world.

1. Introduction

In the present age of unprecedented interrelation, migration, and the dynamic interplay of cultural plurality and interreligious dialogue, the perception of Islam and the formation of Muslim identities have become alarmingly salient and controverted issues. Literature, as a profound conduit of cultural expression, offers a critical lens through which these perceptions and identities can be examined. But, historically these literary texts dealing with Islamic themes have been taught through different perspectives i.e. Eurocentric. These perceptions have always been influenced by colonial ideologies and orientalist perceptions. Edward Saied’s groundbreakingwork, *Orientalism* (1978)- a systematic distortion of Eastern cultures to reinforce Western hegemony has been fundamental basis in understanding how the Western Literature helped in constructing the “Orient” (including the Muslim world) as exotic, backward and fundamentally different from the “West”. This orientalist interpretive stance often reinforced harmful stereotypes, showcasing Islam as a homogenous entity and Muslims as the “Other” which has contributed significantly to the emergence of Islamophobia, a critical term which denotes the discrimination, prejudice or hostility created against Islam or Muslims. This paper explores the intersection between Islam, Islamophobia and identity formation through the prism of cultural studies, critiquing how literary texts help in shaping and challenging prevailing perceptions. In addition, this study reimagines

pedagogical approaches to teaching such texts, focusing on the integration of decolonial pedagogical approach that foster critical thinking, cultural awareness and empathy. It argues that today's learners should be equipped to deconstruct the orientalist depictions and socio-cultural roots of Islamophobia. They should engage themselves to promote inclusivity with diverse narratives of Muslim self-representation, agency and resilience. This study also reimagines how educators need to integrate teaching methods that cultivate cultural awareness, critical thinking, empathy, and the ability to move beyond simplistic binary oppositions among students. This paper seeks to address the following questions: How do literary texts shape and challenge prevailing perceptions about Islamophobia? What is the role of literature in the process of identity negotiation for Muslims in postcolonial contexts? How decolonial pedagogical approaches help in transforming the teaching of literature with Islamic themes? The following sections will establish the theoretical foundations for this approach, analyze selected literary works through this lens, and propose practical strategies for implementation in educational settings.

2. Literature Review: Islamophobia, Orientalism, and Identity Formation in Literary Discourse

2.1 Historical Context of Islam in Literature:

The literary landscape of Islam in western literature has a significant and contentious history from the medieval texts, reflecting the shift of socio-political contexts and intellectual paradigms. As Lyons (2012) dictates, Muslims were often portrayed as pagans' idolaters or heretics through medieval European Literature which reflects the rise political and religious tension of the Crusade era. More nuanced portrayals predominantly shaped by exoticism and cultural assumptions have been witnessed by the renaissance and Enlightenment periods where authentic engagement with Islamic traditions were invisible (Al-Dabbagh, 2010).

These representations were further codified by the 18th and 19th centuries Colonial Literature, centering the works by authors as Kipling reinforcing notions of Western superiority and Eastern backwardness. Such literary traditions established enduring tropes including the oppressed Muslim woman, the violent Muslim man, and the mysterious, sensual Orient (Nash, 2012). These representations were not merely artistic choices but reflections of and contributions to imperial power structures.

2.2 Orientalism and Literary Studies

Said's Orientalism (1978) demonstrates how Western literature has conventionally constructed Muslim identity as the "Other"—exotic, illogical, and menacing—sustaining civilizational binaries that justified colonial occupation. These tropes still influence discourse today, minimizing Muslims to stereotypes of fanatics or victimized victims (Morey & Yaqin 2011). Though postcolonial theorists such as Bhabha and Spivak speak in favor of subaltern voices, and novels such as Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and Aboulela's *The Translator* (1999) present sophisticated representations, post-9/11 fiction tends to recycle orientalist stereotypes. Said's critique continues to be essential for decolonial literary theory.

2.3 Contemporary Approaches to Teaching Islamic Literature

Current pedagogical approaches to Islamic-themed literature privilege cultural distance in treating texts as artifacts (Rahman, 2013) or comparative/historical frameworks emphasizing conflict (Shah, 2018). Such approaches risk othering Muslim narratives and disregarding authorial agency. Shah (2018) mentions three common methods: the anthropological approach, which sees texts as cultural artifacts; the comparative approach, which puts Islamic texts in contrast with "Western" ones; and the historical approach, which focuses on political contexts but often highlights conflict too much. Chambers (2021) proposes treating such texts instead as dynamic spaces for identity negotiation (p. 87).

There exists a crucial lacuna in combating Islamophobia—Irrational anti-Muslim bigotry (Kumar, 2012)—in literary pedagogy. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (Hamid, 2007) and *Home Fire* (Shamsie, 2017) are novels that challenge dehumanizing stereotypes by

presenting Muslim protagonists negotiating identity and structural prejudice. However, there are limited approaches that bring together anti-Islamophobic analysis and decolonial theory to aid diverse identity construction.

This study presents an innovative pedagogical model responding to these disparities, prioritizing Muslim agency and debunking simplistic cultural dichotomies.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Cultural Studies Perspective

This paper employs a cultural studies approach, making explicit use of Stuart Hall's concept of representation which doesn't merely mirror pre-existing identities but participates in constructing them through systems of signification. According to Hall it is constitutive rather than reflection of reality. Translated to literary representations of Muslim identities, this approach demonstrates that texts do not merely reflect but actually constitute the meaning of Islam and Muslims in various cultural contexts.

Cultural studies pays particular attentions to the role of power in determining which representations gain cultural legitimacy. Williams (1977) argues that dominant cultural forms exist to reflect and support existing power relations. This theoretical model helps explain how orientalist representations of Muslims have gained and maintained cultural authority, even if they are distant from the actual lived experiences of Muslims.

3.2 Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory examines how colonial histories shape current representations. Bhabha's (1994) theory of hybridity reveals how postcolonial identities are formed through the clash of colonizer and colonized culture, allowing for resistance and new identifications—especially relevant to how Muslim fictional characters resist binary oppositions. Spivak's (1988) notion of the subaltern questions Western discourse's inclination to silence the subaltern, offering an approach to consider which Muslim voices are heard and which are not.

3.3 Identity Formation Theories

This paper answers identity formation theories by acknowledging its dynamic, contextual nature. Hall's (1996) identity definition of "not an essence but a positioning" (p. 226) provides a foundation upon which to view Muslim identity as always being negotiated, not fixed. Similarly, Erikson's (1968) developmental theory, when extended to religious and cultural identity, emphasizes that both personal agency and social context are implicated in identity formation.

3.4 Decolonial Pedagogy

Decolonial pedagogy, as Mignolo (2011) and Walsh (2018) have explained it, challenges colonial knowledge configurations and centers marginal ways of knowing. Decolonial pedagogy interrogates the strategies education privileges Western knowledge and requires transformation. This framework makes possible the teaching of literature containing Islamic content by working through issues of representation, colonial histories, identity construction, and the informative transformative practices.

4. Analysis of Selected Literary Works

4.1 Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is a reflective examination of Muslim identity formation in the post-9/11 era. Changez, the protagonist, occupies fluid subject positions—as Princeton graduate, corporate employee, Pakistani national, and subsequent American imperialist opponent—illustrating how identity is forged through geopolitical processes and encounters with othering. According to Rahman (2020), "Hamid places his protagonist at the crossroads of cultural identity and global capitalism, laying bare their tensions and contradictions" (p. 112). The novel's monologic tendency reverses orientalist tradition by investing narrative agency in the Muslim protagonist instead of a Western

observer, thereby undermining what Said (1978) identified as the tendency to represent the experiences of the Other instead of allowing the Other to be freely expressed. Furthermore, the open-ended conclusion undermines facile interpretation, compelling the reader to struggle with ambiguity rather than reaching definitive moral conclusions.

4.2 Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*

Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* traces the religious and personal rebirth of Najwa, a once privileged Sudanese woman made into a refugee in London who discovers a new sense of herself through Islamic devotion. This version counters Western feminist representations of Islam as oppressive per se, along with conservative traditionalist ones neglecting women's agency in religion. Hassan (2018) writes that "Minaret portrays spiritual awakening not as withdrawal from modernity but as negotiation with it, representing Islam as a site of both personal and social identity" (p. 73). Najwa's oscillation between her home country, her host nation, and her faith is a classic illustration of Bhabha's (1994) theory of hybridity that instead of adopting or abandoning any single cultural model entirely, she has constructed a complex identity. By doing so, the novel resists flat portrayals of Muslim women and underscores the multidimensionality of postcolonial Muslim identity.

4.3 Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*

Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*, explores the paradoxes British Muslims face in balancing family, religion, and national belonging. The novel presents a spectrum of Muslim characters with varying relationships to religion, politics, and integration. With Isma's decision to report her brother's extremism, Shamsie troubles straightforward conceptions of family duty and religious solidarity. As Ahmed (2019) observes, "Shamsie refuses easy categorizations of 'good' and 'bad' Muslims, instead illuminating the structural factors that shape individual choices" (p. 94). The novel's focus on state surveillance and media narratives works to demonstrate how outside discourses form identity, linking contemporary Islamophobia to older issues of citizenship and belonging while avoiding cultural relativism.

5. A New Pedagogical Framework

Based on the theoretical foundations and literary analyses presented above, A decolonial pedagogical framework for teaching literature with Islamic themes is proposed below. This framework consists of the following principles and strategies:

5.1 Foregrounding Multifaceted Muslim Perspectives

Educators should emphasize on involving selective texts that represent different Islamic traditions, cultural backgrounds and political perspectives. This will help in avoiding the monolithic treatment of Islam and for this educators should also emphasize the diversity of cross cultural, geographical and historical contexts through Muslim experiences. These representations will help educators to disrupt orientalist tendencies to homogenize Muslim identities.

Pedagogical Framework: While creating reading list, texts and writings from different Muslim Authors i.e. Sunni, Sufi, Shia and secular should be emphasized to represent various voices representing multifaceted political and theological positions within Islam.

5.2 Contextualizing Historical Representations

Educators while teaching orientalist depicted texts (historical or contemporary) should furnish their lecture with historical backgrounds/concepts so that students may understand how these representations emerged from specific political and social conditions. This approach doesn't only dismiss problematic texts but also not accept their depictions uncritically.

Pedagogical Framework: Integrate literary texts with historical documents, critical essays, or multimedia resources that illuminate the socio-political contexts of their production. For instance, excerpts from Said's *Orientalism* may help in understand the colonial literature depicting Muslims.

5.3 Developing Critical Literacy Skills

To make students identify and understand how power operates through representation is one of the critical components of decolonial pedagogy. Educators should involve teaching students to recognize orientalist tropes, question assumed cultural hierarchies, and test how literary techniques contribute to othering or humanizing Muslim characters.

Pedagogical Framework: Deliver analytical frameworks and selective questions that prompt students to examine character development, narrative perspective, setting, and language in relation to power dynamics and representation. For example, students might track which characters have narrative authority and which are described only through others' perspectives.

5.4 Creating Dialogic Classroom Spaces

Decolonial pedagogy requires the transformation of traditional classroom dynamics where learners will take the lead. This helps in creating space for multiple voices and perspectives. This will involve rethinking whose knowledge is validated, how discussion is nurtured, and how student contributions are evaluated.

Pedagogical Framework: Implement learner based discussion to create opportunities for students to bring their own cultural knowledge into dialogue with texts including structured small-group discussions, student-led seminars, or collaborative annotation activities.

5.5 Connecting Literary Analysis to Contemporary Issues

Educators should reform or arrange a safe space where students' lived experiences and social contexts should be discussed in relevance with textual analysis contemporary manifestations of Islamophobia and identity formation. This connection may help students in recognizing literature not as artifact but a living tradition that shapes and responds to social realities.

Pedagogical Strategy: Students have to study the literary texts which are from integrated contemporary sources—such as news media, social media discourse, or local community narratives. These sources contain the themes present in the literary texts. For instance, students could critically examine media portrayals of recent events impacting Muslim communities and find similarities these representations with the depictions found in the assigned literature, fostering deeper critical engagement and socio-literary awareness.

6. Practical Implementation

6.1 Curriculum Integration

To operate this decolonial approach needs a mindful incorporation into the current curricula so that texts with Islamic themes will not be confined into "multicultural literature" or "world literature". Educators need to incorporate these texts throughout the curriculum. This integration might involve:

- i. Concurrently examining established Western literary texts alongside writings by Muslim authors that explore analogous themes.
- ii. Incorporating views from Muslim traditions in units structured by genre, historical period, or literary movement.
- iii. Developing thematic units that examine universal human experiences through multicultural cultural viewpoints.

6.2 Sample Lesson Sequence

The following instructional sequence demonstrates how instructors can utilize this method in the instance of teaching Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*:

Lesson 1: Contextualizing the Novel

- i. Provide brief historical context for post-9/11 experiences of Muslim Americans
- ii. Introduce dramatic monologue and its literary functions
- iii. Initial reading assignment with guided questions for narrative perspective

Lesson 2: Examining Narrative Devices

- i. Small group reading of chosen passages on how Changez addresses his American audience
- ii. Explanation of unreliable narration and how it affects reader positioning
- iii. Writing activity investigating how narrative perspective influences understanding of events

Lesson 3: Identity Construction within Transnational Spaces

- i. Examination of Changez's changing relationship with Pakistan and America.
- ii. Introduction to concept of hybridity through brief theoretical excerpt
- iii. Joint mapping of influences on Changez's identity throughout the novel

Lesson 4: Linking to Current Contexts

- i. Analysis of current news stories on Muslim Americans' experiences
- ii. Organize discussion on similarities between novel's backdrop and current events
- iii. Reflective writing about how literature influences knowledge of current problems

6.3 Evaluation Methodologies

Traditional assessment methods often reinforce colonial knowledge hierarchies by privileging certain forms of expression and analysis. The following approaches might be included for decolonial assessment.

- i. Cross-modal projects that allow students to express their understanding through diverse media and digital expression
- ii. Dialogic interaction and co-construction of meaning among learners could be emphasized through collaborative assessment.
- iii. Reflective assignments that may connect literary analysis with their sociocultural situation and experiences.
- iv. Performance-based assessments that engage learners with texts' thematic dimensions.

7. Conclusion

This essay makes the case for a decolonial pedagogy of teaching Islamic-themed literature—one that pushes back against orientalist discourses, brings Muslim diverse voices to the forefront, and fosters inclusive classrooms. By analyzing the works of Hamid, Aboulela, and Shamsie, I have shown how contemporary literature is tackling the intersections of Islam, Islamophobia, and identity formation. The proposed curriculum foregrounds critical literacy, contextualization of the past, dialogic pedagogy, and connections to current events, and offers practical strategies for implementing and piloting the curriculum. Although institutional constraints will be obstacles, these practices result in student engagement and serve social justice. Future research might explore how this framework functions in different educational contexts, examine student responses to decolonial pedagogical approaches, and develop additional resources for educators seeking to implement these strategies. As educational institutions are increasingly recognizing the need for inclusive and culturally responsive pedagogy, strategies that emphasize resisting Islamophobia and facilitating complicated identity development have become ever more vital. Literature's potential to develop empathy and enhance critical thinking capacity makes it a critical medium for resisting bias and creating more just communities. Through purposeful pedagogical strategies, this potential can be even more fully harnessed.

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