

Literary Education and Wisdom Literature in Madrasa Curriculum

Perwerdeya Edebîyatê û Edebîyata Îrfanî di Mufredata
Medreseyê de

Serdar ŞENGÜL

Serdar ŞENGÜL | <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4709-3745>|serdarsenguls@gmail.com
Kırşehir Ahi Evran University, Department of Anthropology, Kırşehir, Turkey

Citation:

Şengül, S. (2024). Literary Education and Wisdom Literature in Madrasa Curriculum. *Nubihar Akademî* 21, 91-102.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55253/2024.nubihar.1490946>.

Submission Date	27.05.2024
Acceptance Date	27.06.2024
Publication Date	30.06.2024
Peer-Review	Double anonymized - Two External
Ethical Statement	It is declared that scientific and ethical principles have been followed while carrying out and writing this study and that all the sources used have been properly cited.
Plagiarism Checks	Yes – iThenticate
Conflicts of Interest	There is no conflict of interest between the author and any parties in the article.
Complaints	The author(s) has no conflict of interest to declare.
Grant Support	The author(s) acknowledge that they received no external funding in support of this research.
Copyright & License	Authors publishing in the journal retain the copyright to their work licensed under the CC BY-NC 4.0 .

Abstract

Throughout the history of Muslim societies, madrasas have been among the most important institutions for literacy in scientific and literary fields, as well as for the training of religious experts. Literary and traditional texts, which are not compulsory in madrasas curricula but are studied as part of the education, offer insights into how universal religious sciences are received and applied in personal and social lives. This literary and traditional literature bestows upon madrasa graduates the dual identity of anthropologist and scholar. Both the literature and the methods of teaching in madrasas can make a significant contribution to the anthropological study of the Islamic world.

Keywords

Madrasa, literary humanism, wisdom literature, madrasa curriculum, antropology.

Puxte

Di dîroka civakên misilmanan de medrese ne tenê sazîyek e ku pisporan perwerde dike, ew di heman demê de yek ji sazîyên sereke ye ku tê da xwendin û nivîsandina warên zanistî û edebî peyda dibû. Metnên edebî û îrfanî, ku ne di nav kitêbên rêzê de ne yên ku di medreseyan de bi zerûrî têne xwendin, lê wekî beşek perwerdehiya taybet têne xwendin, pêşbînîyekê didin ku zanistên dînî yên ku gerdûnî têne hesibandin çawa di kesayetiya mirovan û jiyana civakî de şêwazên cuda werdigirin û bi şêwazên cuda têne sepandin. Wêjeya edebî û îrfanî ya bi vî rengî li kêleka nasnameya alimîyê nasnameyê mirovnasiyê jî dide xwendayên medreseyê. Hem lîteratura edebiyatê û hem jî awayê perwerdekirina vê edebiyatê dê lêkolînên antropolojîk ên alema Îslamê ber bi pêş ve bibin.

Peyvên Sereke

Medrese, humanîzma edebî, edebiyata îrfanî, mufredata medreseyê, antropolojî.

Introduction

When I was writing my doctoral thesis on madrasas, I interviewed scholars who had received madrasa training. One of them was Mele Khalil. He was interested in and well versed in classical Persian and Kurdish literature. When I asked him where he had learned Persian, he told me that he had learned it by reading texts with different *seydas*[•] during his madrasa education.

After one of our meetings, we bought some of the books mentioned in our interview from a bookstore in the Sur neighborhood of Diyarbakır that sells madrasa books. These bookstores were usually located in a passageway, unnoticed from the outside and generally known only to their regular customers (Şengül, 2023). Along the way, he would say, "If you want to anthropologize the Middle East and the Islamic world, you have to read Ehmedê Xanî, Melayê Cizîrî, Feqiyê Teyran, Sa'dî, Attar and Hâfız, as these men show the best way to understand the people, customs and traditions of the Islamic world. In a way, they are the anthropologists of their time," he said with a smile.

I was still at the beginning of my studies, and I remember being surprised to hear such an assessment from a scholar who had received a madrasa education. The fact that a madrasa teacher highlighted the importance of literary and wisdom works in understanding everyday life in the Islamic world, even with reference to the discipline of anthropology, was a revelation. It served as a warning to me that there are various sources of knowledge that I should consider when evaluating madrasa education and its social impact.

In the course of my doctoral research, I realized that the interest of madrasa teachers and students in literary and traditional texts was not limited to Mele Khalil. Although my dissertation investigated the emergence and change of the curriculum in Kurdish madrasas, I did not conduct an independent study on this topic until after completing my dissertation.

In this article, I will discuss how and for what pedagogical purposes literary and wisdom texts are read in madrasas, drawing on the data I collected during and after my dissertation, as well as additional reading I did on this topic. For this study, interviews were conducted with madrasa teachers in Diyarbakır and Mardin. In accordance with the ethical principles of the study, the names of the interviewees were changed, and informed consent was obtained for the interview data used in the study.

• Seyda: A word used to describe scholars who provide madrasa education.

The article begins with a brief historical overview of the various scholarly traditions in the Islamic world and the institutions in which they are taught. It then provides data on the place of literary and mystical texts in the curriculum and the pedagogical context of the Kurdish madrasas.

1. Intellectual Traditions in the Islamic World and Educational Institutions

In the Islamic world, different conceptions of religion began to emerge and live among the Companions of the Prophet even when Islam still ruled the Hejaz peninsula. Class and tribal differences helped shape these varying understandings. However, the real and deeper differentiation occurred in the process of encountering non-Arab communities during the spread of Islam beyond the Hejaz Peninsula.

In the areas under Byzantine and Sassanid rule that the Arabs first encountered, centuries of institutionalization and accumulation in the fields of theology, philosophy, literature and music already existed. The encounter of Islam and its bearer, the Arabs, with this accumulation and the acceptance of Islam by non-Arab peoples, as well as the integration of their cultural and artistic traditions and forms of expression, especially language, had a decisive impact on the shaping of scientific, literary, and esthetic understanding in the Islamic world.

The adoption of Islam by non-Arab peoples led to hybrid and cosmopolitan formations where different scholarly and literary traditions not only competed with but also influenced each other. Orientalist and essentialist approaches that treat the Islamic world as an ahistorical, monolithic entity, however, employ an ahistorical method of analysis that excludes both these formations and the processes of creating and reading the scientific, literary and esthetic works in which they are expressed.

Thus, socio-historical and anthropological studies on the emergence and transformation of various intellectual traditions can significantly contribute to overcoming orientalist and essentialist historiographies. By placing the scientific, literary, and intellectual production of knowledge within a broad political, cultural and historical context, it is possible to analyze knowledge production as a collective process in which different actors interact.

1.1. Classification of Sciences

In the Islamic world, many philosophers, scholars and Sufi masters —from Kindi, Farabi and Ghazali to Sheikh Waliullah Dehlawi —have conducted studies on the classification of sciences. (Bakar, 1998, p. 1). The primary motive behind this whole intellectual endeavor seems to be the concern to maintain the hierarchy of the sciences and to delineate the scope and place of each science within the overall scheme of knowledge. (Bakar, p. 1). The above classifications by Islamic scholars and philosophers were generally made from a philosophical and theological perspective, without considering the historical, political and socio-cultural contexts.

In these classifications, different concepts of science are defined as philosophers and intellectual schools to express the scientific approaches they represent. Each of the philosophical, theological, mystical and wisdom-based approaches claim priority in terms of understanding and realizing religion (Bakar, pp. 2-4). The basis of the classification is that each philosopher and school follows an approach that emphasizes its own philosophy of knowledge from its unique viewpoint (4).

One of the first and most important examples of the study of various scientific traditions on a sociological basis is Ibn Khaldun's (1978) *Muqaddimeh*. In the chapter of the book entitled 'The various types of science. The methods of teaching. The conditions of these connections', Ibn Khaldun examines the different schools of science using a method similar to today's sociological and anthropological approaches. He links the emergence and development of scientific schools to various educational institutions and teaching activities in the Islamic world. In this sense, this chapter in *Muqaddimeh* represents a transition from the philosophy of knowledge to the sociology of knowledge (Taşöz, 2003, p.2).

Ibn Khaldun divides the sciences into two main categories: the philosophical-rational sciences (*aqlî*) and the traditional and revealed sciences (*naqlî*), and he draws a parallel between the development of the philosophical-rational sciences and a high degree of civilization and advanced urban life (2). According to Ibn Khaldun, the traditional sciences, which focus on the phenomenon of prophethood, are specific to human societies bound to the Sharia of the respective religion and are not transferred to other cultural environments, thus showing no development. In contrast, the rational-philosophical sciences, which he describes as a common creation of civilizations, were transferred in continuity and development from ancient Greece and Iran to Islamic societies (Taşöz, pp. 7-8).

Within this framework, Ibn Khaldun argues that the rational-philosophical sciences, which can be transferred from society to society and develop through the objection of the later scholars to the earlier ones, and the transferable sciences, which are specific to their originating society and therefore discontinuous and intransitive, have two different lines of development and cannot be reconciled (Taşöz, pp. 7-8).

The earlier classifications of knowledge and the various scientific and intellectual traditions expressed in Ibn Khaldun's approach led to the emergence of various educational institutions in which these approaches were developed and institutionalized. The pedagogical understanding of the different educational institutions, their curriculum and the way they related to each other varied according to the historical and geographical context.

In modern times, George Makdisi, similar to Ibn Khaldun but with a more direct focus on educational institutions and traditions, analyzed the emergence and development of two distinct intellectual traditions in the medieval Islamic world and the Christian West, which he called scholasticism and humanism, on the basis of educational institutions in his work *Rise of College: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* and *Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and in the Christian West* (1981, 1990).

In his work (Cabiri, 2020), Muhammad Abid al-Jabiri provides a definition that is not limited to educational institutions and classifies the forms of knowledge production in the Islamic world as *beyan*, *irfan* and *burhan* using an archeological and genealogical reading. In his study entitled *Intellectuals in Arab-Islamic Civilization* (2019), al-Jabiri pursues a method that examines scholarly and intellectual traditions in the context of the relationship between knowledge production, power and its public impact.

During my doctoral research, I observed that madrasa students who were learning Arabic as part of their madrasa education in the context of a detailed grammar and language philosophy also read Persian and Kurdish language works. Although the study of these works was not part of the formal Arabic grammar-based curriculum, they were read by the students under the guidance of a seyda. The madrasa teachers I interviewed valued different scholarly traditions and their place in madrasa education through various books.

2. Literary And Spiritual Texts as Anthropology of The Peoples of “The Middle East”

The question of the value and status of literature and literary works has preoccupied scholars in various civilizations. From Ancient Greece to Persia,

different civilizations have produced a considerable number of literary works alongside philosophical and scientific works. These literary works ranged from poems to epics to short stories. Although some literary works had an anonymous character, others were created by an author or poet. Storytellers became a distinct group during this period.

Although literary genres are categorized under different headings, the interaction between genres has led to the emergence of hybrid texts, at least in terms of content. The folktales told by the storytellers were structured and written down by the people of knowledge and wisdom with religious and spiritual content. In addition, the storytellers also incorporated more discourse from poets and scholars in their tales.

Literary and linguistic works had a much wider circulation and influence than scholarly works, which were only accessible to those who could read and write and had some academic training. Even when they were written down, their rhythmic structure and the fact that they were embellished with stories that were familiar to people and therefore suitable for memorization and oral transmission contributed to this wide dissemination.

In the Sunni Islamic world in particular, the textual dominance of the Qur'an also had an impact on the form of literary genres. The parables handed down in the Qur'an have strengthened the narrative form as an exhortative literary genre. While Islamic sciences such as jurisprudence, theology and tafsir, which have developed based on the Qur'an, are grounded in its intellectual elements, literature and wisdom literature have developed on the basis of parables and the short story form.

The special feature of parables is their focus on people, making them suitable for an anthropological reading. While Islamic scholarship places Muslims at the center, the fact that the parables in the Qur'an bring examples from human communities across different eras has also given the parables a cosmopolitan character. Although the parables are closely linked to the cultural hinterland of each society, they have the quality of containing stories about human experiences worldwide.

In the Islamic world, Ibn Sina's mystical-allegorical stories, Sadi Shirazi's Gulistan, Bostan and Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi's Masnavi, which use the narrative form, have set examples for latter works in conveying various human experiences, particularly in Muslim societies.

2.1. Humanism versus Scholasticism?

Scholasticism, as a term, refers to a formal knowledge production and transmission process centred on the text. It is stated that this text-centred education and knowledge production process has a quality that excludes human experience and experience-based knowledge production. On the other hand, humanism and humanistic sciences based on humanism, especially literature, are defined as having a quality that puts human experience at the centre. It is widely accepted that the church-centred scholastic thought in the European experience was overcome by the humanistic disciplines developed during the Renaissance.

In his book *Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and in the Christian West* (1990), George Mqdisi argues that there was a humanist tradition in the Islamic world, but unlike in the Christian West, this humanist tradition was formed before the scholastic tradition rather than after it. According to al-Maqdisi, language and language-based literary sciences developed first in the Islamic world, but with the institutionalisation of madrasas, the scholastic style became dominant, and humanism suffered a setback due to the lack of an institutional basis for development.

Hamid Dabashi (2012), in his study entitled *The World of Persian Literary Humanism* analyses the scholastic and humanist traditions in Islam antagonistically. Focusing on a story in Sadi Shirazi's *Golestan*, Dabashi argues that a humanist tradition in the Islamic world, especially centred in Iran, developed in opposition to the scholastic tradition centred on the Bible (2012, p. 9-27).

Lenn E. Goodman (2003), in his study titled *Islamic Humanism*, investigates the dynamics of secular knowledge production by centring on Miskawayh. Analysing court etiquette, worldly pleasures, and historiography as products of human actions, Goodman tries to reveal the process of knowledge production outside the classical madrasa circles.

While these studies make important contributions to the understanding of the different institutions and schools of knowledge production and transmission in the Islamic world, anthropological studies in this field show that scholastic and humanist traditions were not completely separate from each other in everyday life. As we will try to show in more detail in the next section, scholars with scholastic education benefited from the literature of irfan, while those who produced irfani and literary texts also went through a rigorous madrasa education at some point in their lives.

2.2. Wisdom and Literature in Kurdish Madrasas

The Kurdish madrasas were established during the formative period of medieval Islamic educational institutions, and their curricula were determined accordingly reflecting broader Islamic scholarly traditions. However, the rulers who patronised the madrasas, especially from the Shaddadid period onwards, also encouraged the development of a literary and linguistic tradition. These literary and linguistic works were usually written in the language of the dominant ethnic community to which the ruling family belonged (Aykaç, 2020). This patronage took on a strong institutional character, especially during the time of the Kurdish mîrliks [emirates], leading to the production of many Kurdish literary and linguistic works through translation and original composition (Aykaç, 2020; Adak, 2013).

Evliya Çelebi gives a comprehensive list of Khan's books, including Ibn 'Arabi's *Futûhat* and *Füsûs* texts and their commentaries, which is important to show his special interest in these subjects (Çelebi, p. 335-40). The writings of Evliya Çelebi in his travelog reveal that this literary and linguistic development was not limited to the madrasa and linguistic circles, but spread to the general public and took on a cultural character:

The scholars of Bitlis have a lot of "strange" knowledge. There are many doctors and surgeons. They are all Shafi'i, Ahl-i tariq, believers, devotees, pranksters and poets. The children know the *divan* of Hafiz, *Bostan* and *Gulistan*, and the *divan* of Fuzulî and Sa'ibî by heart. However, they were not advanced in memorizing the Qur'an (Çelebi vol. 4. p. 175)

I conducted a series of interviews to understand the pedagogical level and puposes for which literary and traditional texts are taught in the madrasas of the region. One of my initial objectives was to find out how these texts were sourced. Since madrasa teachers were trained in Arabic script, I started visiting bookstores that sold classical Persian and Kurdish literature in Arabic script. These bookstores sold books on fiqh, hadith, tafsir, al-qa'id and history, as well as sarf and nahiv books, which are essential for teaching Arabic. Although most of the books sold were in Arabic, Persian and Kurdish works were also available, sometimes publicly and sometimes privately (Şengül, 2023).

In my interviews with bookstore owners, it was stated that Sa'di-i Shirazî's *Gulistan* and *Bostan*, called *Kulliyata Sa'di*, and Feridüddin Attar's *Pendname* were the most sought-after books. These works were also the texts used to teach Persian, as later confirmed in my interviews with madrasa teachers. Although not to the same extent as these works, which were also used as

teaching material, it was noted that more sophisticated and demanding literary works such as Hafez's *Dîwan* were also in demand by madrasa teachers.

One of the booksellers I interviewed said that Persian literature was much more popular in the past, whereas today Arabic sarf and nahiv education accounts for almost all madrasa education. The number of scholars who could read and interpret Hafez's *dîwan* was once much higher.

When I asked Mele Ibrahimî Amidî, who translated Sa'di Shîrazî's *Gulistan* from Arabic into Kurdish, about the importance of adab literature in madrasa education, he replied as follows:

Although these works were not part of the core curriculum [*kitebên rêzê*] in madrasas, they were known and studied among madrasa circles. The ability to read and interpret these works was a sign of prestige for madrasa teachers. Therefore, to learn how to read and interpret these works, students travelled to scholars proficient in these texts. Unfortunately, this has diminished over time. Nowadays, madrasas predominantly focus on teaching Arabic grammar.

As my research progressed, I interviewed madrasa teachers about the teaching of wisdom and literary texts in the madrasas. I learned that the intensity of the teaching of literary works varied according to the region and the interests of the scholars who taught them. Among the reasons for these differences were the madrasa teachers' scholarly attitudes and esthetic approach to literature and wisdom, as well as the prevailing scholarly traditions and views in the region where the madrasa classes were held.

For this reason, students who wanted to read literary and traditional works traveled to seydas where they could read such works at a certain stage of their education. Some regions became famous due to the presence of seydas who specialized in teaching such works.

However, in the interviews I conducted, it was stated that in almost every madrasa, after completing Arabic classes and reading the basic works on tafsir, hadith and fiqh sciences, literary and Iranian works are also read.

When I asked one of the interviewees, Mele Metin, how his interest in and familiarity with literary and spiritual works came about, he responded as follows:

Students are introduced to literary and spiritual works from the earliest moments of their education. Books such as *Mewlûda Nabî* and *Nehcu'l Enam*, which are written in verse, offer students a literary flavor. Sciences such as *Beyan* and *Bedii*, which are also taught as part

of language education, provide students with some literary knowledge. In addition, frequent references to poetry in grammar lessons familiarize students with literary works.

However, acquaintance with independent literary works, which also have a linguistic quality, usually occurs after the completion of Molla Jami's commentary on Ibn Hajib's *Kafiye*, which aims to teach students the subtleties of language following grammar training in language classes, and is considered a kind of philosophy of language, often called Molla Jami for short.

When I asked him why literary and wisdom works are specifically read after Molla Jami, he replied as follows:

Literary and wisdom works are forms of religious feelings and thoughts expressed through various means. Since scientific thoughts are also expressed in verse style in the Islamic world, although they have the form of literary works, they have the status of scientific works in which a belief is explained and justified in terms of the content and purpose of the writing. Some of these works are not recognized as rightful [sahih] by the Ahl al-Sunnah ulema, while some of them are written in highly figurative and symbolic language, so that a student who has not studied basic Islamic sciences at the beginning of his education cannot understand these texts, but worse, there is a possibility that his faith will be damaged by misunderstanding them. For this reason, such texts are taught towards the end of the education, mainly to achieve the moral maturity of the student.

In one of my interviews with him, Mele Khalil gave the following answer when I asked him at what level literary and spiritual texts are taught in the madrasas of the region:

Sa'dîs *Gulistan* and Attar's *Pendname* were taught only after the completion of the must courses to ensure moral maturity. However, since the *Dîwans* of Melayê Cizîrî and Hafez were more philosophical texts that appealed to a more sophisticated taste and required a deeper level of erudition, they were not among the texts selected for teaching. These works were only read privately by the student if he found a *seyda* to read them with him; they were not among the Sufi texts read in this way.

The practice of reading literary and mystical works to achieve moral maturation is in line with Mele Khalil's assessment that such works are a kind of anthropology and their authors can be considered anthropologists of their time.

Conclusion

The anthropological study of madrasas has shown that these institutions have a function and task that goes beyond that of a vocational school for the training of experts in religious matters. In addition to teaching basic Islamic sciences such as tafsir, hadith and fiqh through a curriculum based on the Arabic language, madrasas also aimed to educate their students about various aspects of human life through literary and traditional texts.

In this way, madrasa scholars were not only experts in religious matters, but also had knowledge and insight into the societies they inhabited, including the profiles and characteristics of the people who lived in that society.

Examining the literature on literature and wisdom through this lens provides important insights into the social roles of madrasas and their scholars, illustrating how these roles evolved in relation to different power structures.

References

- Adak, A. (2013). *Destpêka Edebiyata Kurdî ya Klasîk*. İstanbul: Nûbihar.
- Aykaç, Y. (2020). *Kürt Mirliklerinde Edebi Ptronaj (1514-1846)*. Yayınlanmamış Doktora Tezi. Dicle Üniversitesi.
- Bakar, O. (1998). *Classification of Knowledge in Islam*. Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Text Society.
- Cabiri, Muhamed A. (2020). *Arap Aklının Yapısı*. İstanbul: Mana.
- Cabiri, Muhammed A. (2019). *Arap-İslam Medeniyetinde Entelektüeller*. İstanbul: Mana.
- Goodman, L. (2003). *Islamic Humanism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hamid, D. (2012). *The World of Persian Literary Humanism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Makdisi, G. (1981). *Rise of College: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Makdisi, G. (1990). *Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and in the Christian West*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Schimmel, A.M. (1992). *A Two-Colored Brocade: The Imagery of Persian Poetry*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Schimmel, A.M. (2011). *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Şengül S. (2021). Melayê Cizîrî ve Diwan Okuma Geleneği. *Kurd Araştırmaları*. <https://www.kurdarastirmalari.com/yazi-detay-oku-104>.