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The Cultural Context of American Literature: A Barrier or a Bridge to Understanding?

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I have been teaching American literature at a number of colleges and universities in the Arab world. My students, seniors and graduate students, have so far been Muslim Arabs, mostly from Jordan, and, more recently, from the United Arab Emirates. Most have been majoring in English (including American literature), the rest in linguistics. Some take American literature (nineteenth and twentieth-century) classes to fulfill a general departmental requirement; others take them out of curiosity or desire, or both. Most have no previous academic exposure to American culture or literature, and many are not aware of ever having read any American literature. Still, they bring with them a host of images and accompanying emotions, ranging from suspicion to mistrust, along with curiosity; as well as the belief that American literature counts because of the world supremacy of the United States, and that since it is the literature of one of the most powerful nations in the modern world, it is certainly worth exploring.

As a nonnative teaching American literature to classes exclusively made up of Arab students, I have become acutely aware of the fact that my nonnative students of American culture and, therefore, literature shape what they read in many contexts, whether cultural, historical, political, religious, social or moral; and that these contexts, in turn, take on special meanings due to the rearing of the students.

As a matter of fact, the students' impulse to read in relation to their cultural needs and experiences, on the one hand, and their desire, apart from their cultural concerns, to study American literature as*literature*, to see how it works and how it is constructed and what it is in its own right, on the other, two situations unlike each other, create a tension that I have been experiencing for a long while through my academic career as an Arab professor of American literature. To some students, studying American literature is no different from studying their own native literature; that is, it is basically a formalistic activity based on purely academic concerns. However, to the majority of the students, it not only means considering the values or concerns of American literature and the effects of these upon readers, but also implies having to go further and being confronted with the various moral, social, religious, national, political, historical, and even geographical contexts of

American literature. Thus the potential for tension is always there. Not unexpectedly, therefore, this tension becomes a troubling experience for my students as well as for myself, constituting an unwanted element of the class. Few (if any) of the students have taken courses in which they encounter, with such intensity, foreign and nonnative cultures so thoroughly new and challenging to them; so much so that their eagerness and curiosity to know about the literature of the United States as "America" become a great discomfort in the face of human knowledge and culture.

Historically speaking, the Muslim Arab world has constituted for the West (America included) an exotic entity, an alien and somewhat confrontational world (*cf.* Obeidat, *American Literature andOrientalism*). And Western attitudes of considerable antiquity have not yet lost their influence in what is known about this strange "other," in spite of recent developments on the political level. The change of opinion in these ideas from the Middle Ages to the present time has been very small (if not absent).

As to the impact of the culture of the West on the Muslim Arab East, this can be traced all the way back to the most climactic confrontation in the Middle Ages--the Crusades (1095-1291). In this context, it is unfortunate to observe from current confrontations and conflicts (the Gulf Crisis, the Civil War in Lebanon, the *Intifada* in the West Bank in Palestine, the Hezbollah and Hamas warfare) in this part of the world--the Middle East, as some prefer to call it--that wars based on religious or cultural beliefs are capable of generating heated hostility, and that hostility, expectedly, generates further antipathy.

Such events as the Arab-Israeli wars have also given the West (including the United States of America) a renewed share of anxiety and concern about this diverse and complex group of nations and peoples. The new situation has encountered the traditional conflicts of ideas between the two worlds, and thus the centuries-old attitudes led to a widespread mutual misunderstanding, and simultaneously to a coetaneous reluctance to change this situation (for a detailed discussion see Said, *Orientalism; Covering Islam;* "The Phoney Islamic Threat"; *Culture and Imperialism)*. In sum, rather than providing better opportunities for mutual tolerance and trust, contemporary East-West relations have followed certain religious and historical ideas that have engendered further mistrust.

It is within this confusing context that American literature is received in the Arab world (see Obeidat, "On Nonnative Grounds"). That there should be some anxiety on the part of the students in studying it is hardly surprising. This feeling of anxiety (and, to some extent, misunderstanding) has been recently strengthened further by the so called "ethnic cleansing" perpetrated by the Bosnian Serbs in the former Yugoslavia, on the students' fellow Muslim brethren, with, they believe, the

connivance and a policy of what may be termed the "masterly inactivity" of the West, to which the Arab students associate the Americans.

My students' awareness of this conflict of interests has usually come through, however, as a request for detailed background information on American culture and literature; more often as an expression of their inability--more or less--to overcome cultural bias and prejudice; and occasionally as a preference for an in-depth discussion of the literary techniques and values of various American authors from different ages, as well as of what these authors are saying in their works. Admittedly, any class of this nature can, in my view, present very diverse (if not contrary) realities to different students--Arab and non-Arab alike for this matter. But what puzzles me is the constancy of the cultural and moral issues, reflecting the students' perceptions and experiences, that come up in a course on American culture or literature (See, e.g., Asfour; also Dahiyat). I find myself saying often to the students, in this regard, that American literature does not necessarily have to be about nonnative readers, and what they believe and think. In fact, we would be belittling and limiting it if we emphasize too intently what it says about us or what we see and find about ourselves in it.

Who we are and what we believe and think matter, of course. This is a fact that I realize, and it can hardly go unnoticed when I think about my own responses to American literature as I teach it and listen to my students discussing it, both as an individual and as an Arab academician.

The fact is that, at present, the attitude towards professing the "English" literary tradition (American and British) and the very concept of the role as well as the purpose of English as *language* are changing drastically in the Arab-world academy. There has been a heated controversy about the matter: are Arab students actually interested in studying *language* or *literature*? And how much (American or British) literature is to be included in the humanities or arts/letters curriculum? The debate continues: what type of literature? Poetry or prose? Modern or nonmodern? And there remain more crucial questions to be asked as the argument proceeds: how do we go about teaching 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? (for a detailed discussion of this point, see Obeidat, "Departments of English in the Arab World"). Ironically, the very attempt to answer these questions has in itself given rise to further controversies. Rather than finding solutions, we have created more problems instead!

Such controversies lead in some ways to a cluster of other related questions as the following: What advantages are there in teaching a foreign literature? What effect(s) does a nonnative literary text have on our students? (see on this issue Zughoul, "Restructuring the English Department in Third World Universities"). In answering these questions, and others of basically the same nature, some scholars

of English in the Arab academy argue that when we introduce any Western literature (not necessarily American or British) into English programs, what we are doing is introducing a culturally "superior," if somewhat threatening, subject that represents a world more powerful, more dominating, and more compelling than our own culture (For a thorough elaboration of this point, see Said, *Orientalism*). And, in this particular context, the "English" literary tradition is considered to be, by a host of specialists, belonging to a culture that has in reality colonized or dominated ours for prolonged periods of time. Other scholars, on the other hand, believe that teaching British and American literature is solely an attempt towards spreading racist, reductionist, prejudiced, and hostile views which sharply conflict with the cultural and ethical codes of Arab students (This is what Zughoul suggests in "English Departments in Third World Universities"). Therefore, pathetically I would say, teaching nonnative literature is rarely seen as an opportunity for a better understanding of the culture which it embodies, or for a better intellectual experience.

Arab universities did not start to offer undergraduate classes in specifically American culture and literature until the late 1970s. But, by that time, with seven universities listing offerings in American literature at the graduate level, American literature had gained a secure place in English departments. Shortly after, the study of American literature flowered and reached professional maturity in some ways.

While the scarcity of English department course offerings in American literature and culture prior to the 1960s was in part due to an absence of qualified and dedicated faculty, by 1980 English departments were willing to devote resources to a field which was increasingly accepted on intellectual grounds. A few examples of the American literature classes taught between 1970 and 1980 indicate this growing vitality. By the early and mid-1980s, courses in American prose, drama, and poetry before and after 1900 were regularly taught, both at the graduate and undergraduate levels, at various Arab universities.

In "Nineteenth-Century American Literature," for example, the students typically encounter a survey of major authors in the century, with an emphasis on Irving, Bryant, Emerson, Hawthorne, Longfellow, Poe, Thoreau, and Melville, to mention just a few names. In "Twentieth-Century American Literature," on the other hand, students have a survey of major and representative authors in twentieth-century American literature, with an emphasis on Twain, James, Frost, Stevens, Eliot, and Steinbeck. The course, as its title suggests, emphasizes that American literature acquired a unique character in the twentieth century, having moved away from British models in the later part of the nineteenth. As reflecting the general situation, in such courses the students often encounter a number of traditional and contemporary genres, themes, concerns, and techniques represented by works from various American authors.

Through supplemental readings, lectures, videos, and visits to the local American Culture Centre of the United States Information Service, I, for one, try to make my students knowledgeable and effective in their study of various aspects of traditional and modern American literature as well as culture. My aim is to give the students contexts which provide a kind of sequence and continuity; as we move from nineteenth-century poetry and prose to twentieth-century images, motifs, patterns, structures, and variation in values across periods and genres.

Of course, the connections are not smooth or constant, or always easy. The students are learning both the culture and, as they become aware of literary variations or historical change, the limitations of generalization. (The students' academic and cultural backgrounds, different interests, and lack of previous serious, sophisticated coursework mean that they lack a common basis for specialization. And I also realize that by restricting courses to a period, a region, a group of authors, or a genre, I do invite easy and smooth generalizing, while allowing for in-depth interpretation and critical thinking.). The habit of generalizing about Americans is one of the most annoying handicaps the students bring to class, and I want to make it clear to them that this is not what Americans really are, as I help them realize, at the same time, how we can learn by avoiding "uneducated" generalizations or preconceptions of other peoples and nations. Equally importantly, by offering a wide range of authors (including women and ethnic writers) and works from different periods of American literature, I also try to give my students an opportunity to discover an area, a genre, a theme, or a topic that they can feel enthusiastic about and may continue to study independently in the light of the context my American literature courses provide.

One important element that many of my students have always brought to the study of American literature is religious experience or awareness. A large number of them indicate that they have grown up with strong religious affiliation and practice. Therefore, they identify themselves culturally as "Muslims," and quite a few of them speak up on this issue (which often elicits intriguing discussions in the class). The acknowledgement on the part of the students of their religious beliefs, or spiritual experiences of any sort, reflects, among other things, cultural and religious traditions. It is not surprising, then, that the religious background of the students is one of the grounds on which Arab and American cultures meet, as the students question, explore, and examine American literature in its cultural contexts. Indeed, the spiritual nature of the students dictates their responses to American literature and gives shape to its discussion in class.

If the students do not bring religious awareness to the class, they bring something else, other expectations and preconceptions that may equally influence or overwhelm the discussion of American literature. To illustrate, quite a few of my students come with a strong tendency to romanticize Americans and their culture; and even have an eager readiness to identify with the American people. On the other hand, others, influenced by what they see on T.V., by a vision of economic

and erotic liberation, by images of American popular culture, by the violence and vehemence of many black American films, by rock-'n-roll, books, and music, expect that everything they will read will make them hate American culture even more! The students' propensity to see the Americans they want to see becomes a barrier, perhaps even more important than the religious one, that must be broken down if they really are to begin to pay attention to the literature itself and to the people who created it. I suggest that one way of breaking down this barrier is by the discussion of the very American literature (in the context not only of history and culture, but also of "literariness" or "literarity"), as it can provide an opportunity for the students to recognize, and respond to, native American experience--literary and nonliterary alike--without having to scrutinize directly their own assumptions or expectations of it.

Yet, the major obstacle remains the nature of East-West relations. As I have pointed out above, and also suggested elsewhere (see Obeidat, "Prospects for American Studies in the Arab World: Present and Future"), Arab and American cultures confront each other within an almost confusing context of mistrust that has been with us since the Crusades, through the Arab-Israeli Wars, and up to the Gulf War. Therefore, the study of American literature is often accompanied by a painful sense of suspicion over the history of East-West relations. (Students may insist that mistrust is an inevitable, mutual response, resisting to which is unrealistic.) But once the students begin to study American literature, their inclinations to feel suspicious--and/or romanticize--lead to perplexity, and thus to difficulty. I find myself facing a tremendous amount of challenge as I try to maintain their interest in, and concern with, American literature while helping them to overcome the difficulties that sophisticated knowledge demands. Above all, the students are disappointed when they find themselves taken aback by the assumptions, attitudes, or beliefs expressed in their reading and writing assignments. Their "uneasiness" when they read subtle and complex works by Emerson, Hawthorne, and Melville, for instance, disrupts their readiness to study American literature, and thus the whole basis for their interest in American culture begins to be undermined. But, at the same time, some begin to realize that feelings of mistrust may only be reflexive responses on their part. In my view, reading more American works and knowing more American authors speed up this recognition. Such students become aware of their own reactions, as they realize the need for themselves to have a more complex response to human history, culture, and literature at large.

Most difficult of all the "problems" that I face, as I try to help the students to work effectively through their assumptions and preconceptions, is the need to deal constructively with their uneasiness or perplexity. It is especially difficult because it is most clearly a psycho-cultural issue. What I would want to do is to redefine the proper response to past and present confusions, not as cultural "bias," but as a renewed responsibility to know about the conflicts of the past and the tolerance of the present. Such responsibility can, I believe, be intellectually, culturally, socially, morally, and even politically productive and meaningful. Because such issues are

so complex and so sophisticated that, this is, as I have been trying to suggest, one of the most difficult and challenging aspects for me of teaching American literature courses.

I have discovered that I can, to some degree, remove the students' cultural shock by anticipating their confusions and difficulties from the very outset. Anticipating these difficulties can help reduce (if not remove) the students' need to work through their own assumptions and individual beliefs, and can, at the same time, shift emphasis toward a more in-depth encounter with the literature (and not with individual responses). This in turn helps the students to transform their expectations into acceptance of the complexities of American literature as a field of *human* knowledge, or, rather, into a recognition of not only cultural and historical, but also literary contexts as sources of intellectually demanding experiences.

I tell them on the first day of the term that they are going to work harder than they expect and in relatively different ways than in their previous "English" classes. I make it clear to them that we need to learn to work on unfamiliar, nonnative grounds, maybe with a little discomfort and uncertainty. Each time I have taught American literature courses, I have told my students at the beginning about the complexity of some the works and authors they are going to encounter, and assigned background reading. Some students may at first be a little impatient with the reading assignments I give them, either because these make complex demands on the reader, or because the content of the texts are too *foreign* to them. However, I have come to recognize the value of background reading, as this helps deepen the students' understanding of, and interest in, American poetry, prose, and drama. It also enables them to reconsider their preconceptions and expectations in such a way as to make them more enthusiastic about undertaking their reading assignments in American culture, history and literature.

In dealing with the students' problems, I have also found it very helpful to ask them questions or try out ideas to which I can respond in class. As the students encounter certain reactions and situations that seem familiar, I urge them to define the familiarity, as clearly as they can, to find, and become more aware of, seemingly similar situations or behaviours in the culture which they are learning about. The students must be given the proper opportunities to discuss, criticize, and even disagree for an atmosphere that encourages understanding (rather than misunderstanding) of cultural differences.

What I am trying to say is that I have been addressing in my American literature classes the question of how to deal appropriately with the students' preconceptions and/or personal assumptions as they study American literature, without allowing these to overwhelm in-class discussions, in order to enable the students to have a fuller and more direct engagement with the literature as literature. My experience has shown me that this can be accomplished by making a serious commitment to

dealing with literature (whether American or not) on its own merits, and encouraging students (Arab and nonArab) to share that commitment, for its own sake. For nonnatives, in particular, I assume this means exerting efforts to recognize those merits in their own right, realizing that they will vary with the literature's contexts, and expanding our studies and/or programs beyond preconceptions to the literary traditions and other aspects of culture.

Some students, however, may initially be skeptical of this project and insist that American literature has cultural agendas that are different from their own, and that fail to address the needs and questions of nonnatives. I tell them that my aim is not to dissolve cultural conflicts, opposing impulses, emphases, and assertions, or to resolve them easily (because I cannot), but to enable them, the students, to become cognizant of these issues, and to advance their own understandings of the cultures and literatures they are learning about.

American literature is not, admittedly, an easy class for my students or myself. That my students have been very willing to make every effort to work under these circumstances becomes clear at the end of the term, and their growth beyond stereotyped assumptions and personal expectations to serious, in-depth engagement with American culture and literature is noteworthy. In the eyes of my students, in conclusion, American literature is ultimately seen as a literature of a great nation that obviously holds a superior place among the nations of an ever-developing world, and they realize that the study of such a nonnative literature is an attempt to bridge whatever cultural tension we have by building bridges instead of walls, and by having a better understanding of the culture from which the literature grows.

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