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Academic Imperialism: Towards Decolonisation of English Literature in Iranian Universities

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Abstract

When the disintegration of Western colonies in Africa and Asia ended the formal colonialism, the structures of dependency remained intact and were mushroomed to other countries in the region. One such dependency is academic dependency in which universities in much of Asia and Africa follow the curricula introduced in the colonial era. Although scholars put a great deal of efforts in challenging this academic imperialism, this dependency has been promoted by departments such as Department of English. Whereas “World Literature in English” or “Literary Studies” is gaining momentum around the world, the English literature programmes in Iranian universities are celebrating the Anglo-American canonical literature. By drawing on Syed Hussein Alatas’ concepts of “academic dependency,” this paper examines how the English literature programmes in Iran are promoting academic imperialism, which prompts the urgency of decolonisation of English literature. It also reveals how this decolonisation can be taken to its ultimate conclusion.

Keywords: academic imperialism, dependency, English literature, world literature, inclusion, decolonisation

Introduction

The disintegration of European colonies in Africa and Asia had a powerful influence upon the nationalist movements, increased the national historical consciousness, and brought about a worldwide sentiment against colonialism. Since then, the world has witnessed debates about the interwoven issues of Eurocentrism, Orientalism, imperialism, and racism. A diverse group of activists and scholars from a wide variety of disciplines in academia invoked many
buzzwords, such as “homeless intellectual” (Shariati, 1971), “Orientalism” (Said, 1978), the “indigenisation of social sciences” (Atal, 1981), “endogenous intellectual creativity” and “autonomous social sciences” (S. H. Alatas, 1981, 2002), “decolonisation” (Zawiah, 1994), “globalisation” (Taylor, 1993), “alternative discourses in social science” (S. F. Alatas, 2006), and “alternative sociology” (Seyed Javad Miri, 2012), to just name a few. They all have been concerned with the issue of decolonisation as a process to emancipate the colonised people from the political, economic, social, and intellectual dependency. Although the disintegration ended the formal colonialism, decolonisation was still not complete as the structures of dependency often remained intact. One such dependency is the academic dependency in which the colonised “captive minds,” to borrow the term from Syed Hussein Alatas (1971), make sure that the education system of their country is faithfully following the Western education model introduced in the colonial era. This explains why the current education system in almost all of the colonised countries is based on Western ethos, values, theories, and intellectual traditions.

Scholars have been putting a great deal of effort in challenging this academic imperialism in fields like Sociology. One such work is “Sociological Theory Beyond the Canon” by Syed Farid Alatas and Vineeta Sinha (2017). However, this academic dependency not only remained intact in some other fields of study, but was also expanded, developed, promoted, and facilitated what Said calls a “relationship of historical dependence and subordination” (1993: 119). What corroborate this historical relationship of “dependence and subordination” have been the universities in Asia and Africa. The impact of colonial education in these universities is considerably evident and confirms how imperialism can thrive without being present physically. Of the departments in these universities that promote Eurocentric, Anglo-American, and imperial values and visions, Department of English Literature is considered to be the most influenced field. Whereas “World Literature in English” or “Literary Studies” has been gaining momentum, Departments of English Literature across these countries are affirming and celebrating the superiority of Canonical English literature and English authors, leaving out all the other great writings in English by writers from other nationalities. Some of these universities accommodate a separate department for British Literature, American Literature and the World Literature, as if Britain and America are on a different planet and not part of this world. This sort of attitude generates a disregard for other writings in English like Iranian or Arab writings in English. An example that best illustrates this disregard is the Department of English in Iranian universities wherein the curriculum does not stand the inclusion of writings in English by

non-English authors. Although Iran has never been colonised in the traditional sense of the term, the colonial ideologies and the Western political and educational influences have been imposed over the nation through different historical eras.

**Academic imperialism**

Post-colonial theory is often-times utilised to explain, analyse and respond to the continuing legacies of colonialism and imperialism. In this paper, a post-colonial perspective of academic dependency will be used to discuss a form of Western imperialism, namely “academic imperialism” through which the West wants to form a regime of global government. Central to this academic imperialism is “education, which has become for the World Bank and the multilateral development agencies a key aspect of their vision of ‘development’” (Tikly, 2004: 173). Prior to delving into what academic imperialism means, a general definition of imperialism is in order. Edward Said rightly considers imperialism as an “educational movement” (1994: 269), and defines imperialism as “the practice, theory, and the attitudes of a dominant metropolitan centre ruling in a distant territory” (1993: 8). Hence, it is a process different from colonialism which is the “implanting of settlements on a distant territory” (*ibid*.). Therefore, although “imperialism is not reducible to colonialism, colonialism has provided in the past a principal means by which imperial interests have been realized” (Tikly, 2004: 174). While different aspects of imperialism such as social, political and economic are often-times examined and discussed, the need to critically study academic imperialism is relatively new. Based on the Western values, theories and intellectual traditions, the present education system in much of Asia and Africa is not only an imposition, but also holds a solid grip on the colonial patterns (Mahmudul Hassan, 2013). This has a root in history and can be traced back to the colonial era when the colonialists modified the system of education as a chief approach to spread the Eurocentric ideologies and stabilise the Western rules. As education has always been the epicentre of each society, it was repackaged and then reestablished to institutionalise the superiority of the West, justify their colonial presence, and for the easy conquering of a vast number of people in a territory. This sentiment is also echoed in Martin Carnoy’s book, “Education as Cultural Imperialism” (1974), wherein he argues that, “Western formal education came to most countries as part of imperialist domination” (*ibid.*: 3). From the establishment of three universities in Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta in 1856 through Dhaka University in Bangladesh to the Tri Chandra College in Nepal and University of Rangoon in Burma, the British made sure that the curricula and syllabi of these universities were designed according to the centres of higher
education in Britain (S. F. Alatas, 2006). America also played a significant role in changing the educational system in much of Asia and Africa. The establishment of the American University of Beirut (AUB) in 1866 and the American University in Cairo (AUC) in 1919 reveals the influence of American educators and administrators in West Asia. The colonial education was promoted on the premises that the colonised can “catch up with the West” in science and technology but as a matter of fact, it was designed and developed for the “creation of inferiority” (Fanon, 1967: 93). It was so internalised by the natives that long after the disintegration of the colonies, the colonising functions of the superior-inferior dichotomy was preserved. This conjures up what the exponent of British colonialism, Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859) stated in his Parliament speech on 2 February 1835:

I have traveled across the length and breadth of India and I have not seen one person who is a beggar, who is a thief. Such wealth I have seen in this country, such high moral values, people of such caliber, that I do not think we would ever conquer this country, unless we break the very backbone of this nation, which is her spiritual and cultural heritage, and, therefore, I propose that we replace her old and ancient education system, her culture, for if the Indians think that all that is foreign and English is good and greater than their own, they will lose their self-esteem, their native culture and they will become what we want them, a truly dominated nation. (Quoted in Avari, 2007: 19)

Under this ideological underpinning, the introduced Western education system in the former colonised countries is still being followed. Even with the emergence of nationalism, the knowledge production in these countries is based on Western epistemology profoundly derived and informed by the colonial thought (Wallerstein, 1996). Gone are the days, however, when Eurocentrism and Orientalism were identified through the political, economic, and territorial conquest and occupation as the ideologies of imperialism and their impact on non-Western countries have wormed their way into the seemingly post-colonial world of today through a delicate deviation. In Academia, Eurocentrism, which is a “superstructure that seeks to impose European (Western) consciousness onto other people’s consciousness” (Asante, 2012: 3), has ceased to work based on the cliché blatant racist and simplistic progressive-backward or the savaged Orient-civilised Occident bifurcations. Instead, it continues through marginalising the non-Western authors, thinkers, concepts, and theories, and as a result the imposition of Western theories and concepts are still retained. Although this form of imperialism is less conspicuous, this educational bigotry normalises
and powerfully consolidates the false binary of “us” and “them.” It pushes the Third World countries into a relationship of dependence on Western institutions of education and, in return, the universities in these countries produce and disseminate knowledge, research, and perspectives based on the Western epistemology. Speaking of academic imperialism, Uberoi (1968: 120) confirms that it “upholds the system of foreign dominance in all matters of scientific and professional life and organization… it subordinates the national science of the poor to the national and international of the rich. It confirms our dependence and helplessness and will not end them.” This shapes the scholars’ attitude and helps them treasure the Western knowledge, education and expertise. They enjoy reading Western authors and teach them, and from this educational bigotry emerges the “mental captivity” (S. H. Alatas, 1971).

Whereas other forms of imperialism such as the political and economic dominance are almost always resisted, this academic dependency not only remained intact after the disintegration, but also expanded and promoted and is welcomed. According to Syed Hussein Alatas (2006), this intellectual imperialism today is a form of hegemony that is “…accepted, willingly with confident enthusiasm, by scholars and planners of the former colonial territories and even in the few countries that remained independent during that period” (ibid.: 7-8). The intellectual imperialism makes us readily accept anything that comes from the West to the extent that we become dubious to validate our own tradition and ourselves (Alvares, 2012). The exhaustive willingness for the Western knowledge is a sort of self-perpetuating academic imperialism. The intellectual imperialism creates a person who seeks Western education, goes by their standards and brag about receiving a degree at the proximity of the rulers. Most of the universities in Asia and Africa encourage their students and staff to pursue their higher education in the West. A case in point is Iran where a degree from any institution in the West stands head and shoulder above a degree received from a top educational institute in Asia. This discrimination sustains the producer-consumed nexus in knowledge production and will cement the so-called superiority of the West. Concomitant with this discrimination is the existing power structure of the West in the production and distribution of knowledge resources, which leads the non-Western scholars to think less of themselves and turn into passive recipients of knowledge.

Thus, the native scholars develop what Syed Hussein Alatas (1972) calls a “captive mind,” which arises from the “overdependence on the western intellectual contribution in the various fields of knowledge” (S. H. Alatas, 2006: 8). Resulting from the academic imperialism, the captive minds’ internalised subjugation repudiates the ability to stand on their own in terms of knowledge production. Fanon (1967) describes this phenomenon as the
“epidermalisation of inferiority” and Varma (2012: 23) calls this stage of colonial strategy the creation of a “a corpus of institutional derision” in which the captive mind looks at the West for concepts, theories teaching methodologies and research, and if they want to carve a niche in academia, they should be published with journals in the West (Garreau, 1988; Alatas, 2006). They would not receive credit for their inventions and scientific innovations unless and until endorsed by the West (Raju, 2012). This practice makes sure that the scholars of the non-West origin cannot catch up or emulate the West in science, and is a recipe to ensure the non-Western inferiority as according to Fanon the dialectic of colonialism is pronounced in “the creation of inferiority” (1967: 93). This academic dependency produces an indirect vehicle of control. Although scholars and intellectuals from different parts of the world protested against the academic imperialism, many “have gone so far as to enjoy the imposed relations” (Shih and Wu, 2012: 331-332). Our universities’ curricula are still fraught with Western thinkers, concepts, authors, and their works, and the recent efforts in including our own thinkers, authors, and their writings seem to be miles behind the milestone.

**Western education in Iran**

Iran was relatively an independent state before the Qajar dynasty; however, during this era, it became dependent in terms of politics, military, education, and economy. Western-style education in Iran can be traced back to the establishment of Dar al-Funun (Abode of Skills) in 1852. The urge to establish such an institution was felt when Naser al-Din Shah and his chief minister, Mirza Taghi Khan Amir Kabir, learned that the superiority of the West is closely related to its modern science and education. The spirit of the institution and the medium of instruction were French and many teachers were hired from France, Austria, Poland, and Holland, alongside the Western-educated Iranian teachers. Since then, various ministries of different governments had been setting up many colleges to train bureaucrats and other government functionaries (Rashedi, 1984). Moving forward to Reza Shah’s reign in 1934, all of these colleges were brought together and formed the University of Tehran, the first such institution. Composed of the colleges of law, engineering, medicine, and art and sciences, the University's curriculum, administration, and organisation were heavily influenced by the French universities. Besides the presence of a great number of European professors, most of the teaching staff of the University had been trained in Europe with the exception of the scholars of Arabic and Persian literature (Elwell-Sutton, 1944). Concomitant with the modernisation (Westernisation) of the educational institutions, Reza Shah curbed the power of the clergy in educational affairs but to neutralise this curbing, he put them in charge of the
Press Censorship. While Westernising the educational system of the country, it is hard to ignore Reza Shah’s praiseworthy effort in creating the Iranian Academy to reform the Persian language of any European and Arabic words, and prepare a pure Persian dictionary in 1935.

Pressured by the Allies in 1941, Reza Shah had to give up his throne in favour of his son, Mohammad Reza Shah. Iran was then occupied for the duration of the Second World War by the Russians, British and later on by the Americans. By the end of the War, Mohammad Reza Shah developed a close relationship with the West, especially the United States with whom Iran entered into “negotiations for a series of programs of assistance” (Rashedi, 1984: 140). A “Memorandum of Understanding” was signed in 1950 between the Iranian government and the United States for establishing the first Point IV Program, which was a series of programs of training and technical assistance for the modernisation of the country, especially at the rural areas. Agriculture, industry, transportation and communication, health, and education were the specific areas in need of transformation. In education, the programme aimed to enhance the educational system that was old-fashioned in terms of its curricula, methods of teaching, choices of textbooks, physical facilities, and administrations. This was the start of a deep American involvement in the educational affairs of the country. During his time, the universities, textbooks, curricula, examinations, the pedagogical techniques, and the education standard were highly impacted by the American system of education. Hossain (1985) argues that some 59 American universities became engaged in counselling the Iranian universities when the Shah decided to overhaul the higher education system. For instance, the Near East Foundation was closely monitoring Jundi Shapur University (Rashedi, 1984). Another prominent example that best demonstrates the American intervention is the Shah’s invitation of a group of experts from Pennsylvania University in erecting the Pahlavi University in Shiraz in 1962 whose curricula, syllabi, buildings, and centres resembled the American universities (Hamdhaidari, 2008). This university hired teachers and lecturers who had studied in the West, especially America and Britain, along with foreign nationals (Hamdhaidari, 2008). Iranian scholars such as Behrangi questioned the relevancy of the imposed curriculum and criticised the country’s American-style education system. In his 1962 Occidentosis: A Plague from the West, Ale-Ahmad also warned of the increasing Westernisation of the Iranian society.

In 1963, the Shah inaugurated his “White Revolution” composed of six points of principle, one of which was the formation of a Literary Corps (Katouzian, 1981). Campaigning against illiteracy in rural areas was apparently the chief mission of the corps but the ulterior motive was to “mobilize the peasantry into an effective base of support for … [the
Shah’s] policies” (Rashedi, 1984: 153). Plus, the Shah had hoped to mitigate the power of the clergy who were in charge of rural maktabs. The clergy protested against the dramatic rise of foreign influence, particularly targeting Western culture and the associated secularisation of public life in Iran (Akhavi, 1980). While making efforts to apply the modernisation, the Shah had overlooked to accommodate those social and economic transmutations in the Iranian cultural and historical contexts. This rapid “progress and the displacement associated with it, along with the lack of institutions and organizations for public interest articulation, led to a mentality of resistance, and even enmity towards modernization/Westernization” and the Shah (Zeiny, 2017: 69). Emanating from this enmity and dissatisfaction was the 1979 Revolution that toppled the Shah’s regime. It goes without saying that the Islamic Republic’s top priority in education was to purge the textbooks and all the other educational materials of positive and complimentary references to the Shah and his dynasty. Committees were formed to debate and discuss the new shape of the educational system to represent the Islamic culture but nothing major happened until Ayatollah Khomeini’s speech on 26 April 1980 in which he stated (Khoemini, 1981: 295-299):

It is necessary for me to clarify what our aim is in reforming the universities. … When we speak of the reform of the universities, what we mean is that our universities are at present in a state of dependency … those whom they educate and train are infatuated with the West. … We have universities in our country for fifty years now… [yet] we have been unable to obtain self-sufficiency in any of the subjects … We have had universities but we are still dependent on the West for all that a nation needs … Our universities lack Islamic morality and fail to impart an Islamic education …They reflect a lack of Islamic education and a true understanding of Islam. The universities, then, must change fundamentally. They must be reconstructed in such a way that our younger people would receive a correct Islamic education side by side with their acquisition of formal learning, not a Western education … To Islamize the universities means to make them autonomous, independent of the West … so that we have an independent country with an independent university system and an independent culture….

What followed this speech of Cultural Revolution was a wholesale educational reassessment and reorganisation, which was expected following the heels of political change. An assembly called the “Cultural Revolution Command” was created to apply changes in the educational system. This Command formed different committees and sub-committees to check and change everything possible from curriculum to the system of examination. One of the
significant aims of the Cultural Revolution was to bridge the Qom Seminary and universities. In the course of curricula reconstruction, the Cultural Revolution Command had been anxiously pointing out that there is no discrepancy and conflict between the Islamic culture and the scientific advancement, but that they have been separated and should be bridged back together (Planning Unit of the Cultural Revolution Command, 1981: 11). During the three years of closure of the universities, the curricula and many textbooks were scrutinized, reassessed, and reformed according to the views of the Islamic Republic. For instance, the essential basic courses of “Political Science”, such as “Foundation of Sociology,” “Foundation of Law,” “Political Geography,” “Political sociology of Iran,” and “Political Psychology,” were replaced by courses such as “Quran and Politics,” “The Political Behavior of the Prophet,” “The Political Behavior of the Twelve Imams,” “The Political Thoughts of Imam Khomeini,” and “The World Echo of the Islamic Revolution.” In addition, courses such as “Study of Islam,” “School of Revolutionary Islamic Ideology,” “History of Islam,” “Islamic Revolution and its Roots,” “Islamic Insights,” “Islamic Ethics,” and later on “Imam’s Will” were accommodated in the curricula of all the majors of study in universities. These mandatory courses were constructed and put on the curricula to make sure that the students of all majors have enough exposure to Islamic teachings. They also complimented the courses that the Command was unable to change like that of Sciences or English Literature in this case. Beside the Islamic mandatory courses, the Command managed to insert “The Study of Islamic Translated Works” (translated excerpts from Quran and Najolbalaghe) in the curriculum of English Language and Literature, and take it for granted that English Literature is literature from the United Kingdom and the United States.

Decolonisation of English literature
The idea of decolonisation of English literature in Iranian universities dawned on me when I was invited for an interview to the Department of English of a State university in Iran. Circed by faculty members, I was plied with questions about my thesis. Halfway through the interview, my application was rejected based on their assumption that my thesis does not have anything to do with English literature and the thesis that I have written does not seem to be a product of an English literature graduate. Much to my chagrin, I realised that my elucidation and insistence on the point that novels and memoirs written by Iranians in English are part of English literature would not have their approval as they were so adamant in their belief that English literature refers to English authors, and by English authors they certainly meant British and American authors. Authors from Canada, Australia, and New Zealand are
not welcome into this category of English literature in Iranian universities. A quick glance at the curriculum and syllabus reveals that Departments of English across Iran have always been celebrating authors such as John Donne, William Shakespeare, Daniel Defoe, William Wordsworth, Jane Austin, Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats, Mary Shelley, Alfred Tennyson, Mark Twain, Thomas Hardy, Charles Dickens, Robert Frost, Virginia Woolf, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, Harold Pinter, William Golding, and Sylvia Plath, whose works form the major part of the canon of English literature in Iran. This canonical literature is very parochial, restricts our aesthetic understanding and sympathies, and at times discourages the scholars and students from reading any other writings in English by writers from other parts of the world.

During the course of reflection on how to decolonise the English Literature in Iranian universities, I remembered what Said writes about music but it virtually applies to everything because it is a social fact. He writes, “No social system, no historical vision, no theoretical totalisation, no matter how powerful, can exhaust all the alternatives or practices that exist within its domain. There is always the possibility to transgress” (Said, 1991: 55). As a key notion, transgression is what pushed me forward to dwell upon challenging and moving beyond the limit of this particular kind of academic imperialism to find alternatives for the current status of English literature in Iranian universities. Anchored within such discourses, I argue that the programmes of English Literature in Iranian universities should be decolonised. Decolonisation, in this sense, is not the elimination of the whole canonical texts, but rather it is the reassessment and re-evaluation of the accepted canonisation, and inclusion of literatures in English from other parts of the world. For this reassessment and inclusion to occur, to begin with, I suggest the programme of “English Literature” changes its name to “World Literature in English” or “Literary Studies,” as “English Literature” is a tad ambiguous; it could either refer to works written by English authors or works written in English. To choose “World Literature in English” or “Literary Studies” over “English Literature” means a step is taken in the right direction in opening up a space for inclusion of literature from other parts of the world. Like the curricula and syllabi of other branches of humanities and social sciences in much of Asia and Africa, the exclusion of non-Western authors in the English literature syllabi was initiated and sustained during the colonial period when the colonial intellectuals and administrators attempted to penetrate the minds of the natives through changing the local education system and introducing the Western knowledge. While some Orientalists, such as Sir William Jones (1746-1794), stressed the importance of keeping and nurturing the local languages along with English, arguing that the “British
government should continue to foster instruction in Sanskrit and Arabic as well as in English for students in institutions of higher education” (quoted in Harlow and Carter, 2003: 227), Orientalists such as Macaulay had an exclusivist agenda and argued that the British government should focus on teaching of English. To convince the British government that it is in their best interest to only promote English and exclude the natives’ language and culture from the local education system, he told the Parliament that (quoted in Harlow and Carter, 2003: 237):

We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population.

The British government was persuaded to exclude Arabic and Sanskrit, and promote English language and literature, which made the governor-general of India, Lord William Bentinck, pass a law on 7 March 1835 stating that the “great objectives of the British Government ought to be the promotion of European literature and science among the natives of India; and that all the funds appropriated to education would best be employed on English education alone” (quoted in Dodwell, 1940: 112). Moreover, the British administration “discovered the power of English Literature as a vehicle for imperial authority” (Ashcroft et al., 2007: 117). The success of the introduction of English literature in India was to the extent that Shakespeare “had turned into some sort of Indian guru” (Ashmead, 1963: 27), which prompted its introduction in other colonies such as Malaysia during the 1940s. Many other countries in Asia and Africa followed suit and introduced the English literature into their curricula. At the British Council Conference on teaching of English literature overseas held in Cambridge, 16-18 July 1962, it was agreed that developing nations with a long cultural history, such as Iran, need English literature in the broadest sense for a better understanding of life in modern society (Ashmead, 1963). That is how the English literature programme found its way to the Iranian universities where the inclusion of non-English authors has not been welcomed. The very important issue of the inclusion of non-English authors writing in English and decolonisation invites many arguments and debates. Issues such as the non-canonical texts cannot be regarded as masterpieces as those of the canon itself or these texts
do not offer the readers the same satisfaction that they enjoy from reading canonical texts have always been divisive and derisive. No one denies the fact that every work in canonical literature is a masterpiece but it is unfair to neglect the significance of writings in English produced in Asia and Africa.

These are the same issues that surfaced during the 1980s and early 1990s when Western scholars, such as Barbara Harlow (1987) and Gerge M. Gugelberger (1991), insisted on the inclusion of “Third World” literature into the canon. This sort of literature was not included into the canon as the West refused to legitimise it due to the assumption that there was a radical difference between the “Third World” and the “canonical literature” (Gugelberger, 1991). Besides, English literature has always been engaged in the discourse of empire and power, and by not including the non-Western authors and thinkers, the West could retain its superiority. However, due to the spirit of ending neo-colonialism and imperialism, and the clarification on the part of anti-colonial scholars that the “Third World” literature is dialogic and maintains a constant dialogue with the West, the so-called “Third World” literature was included into the canon. The insistence of the scholars for the inclusion was their willingness to “learn from them—to learn from the Third World writer how to look into what is really going on in the world and why it has been going on and thus to learn about [their] own limitations” (Gugelberger, 1991: 506). The enthusiasm to read about the “Third World” from the dominant writers such as William Beckford, Walter Scott, Joseph Conrad, Richard Burton, and E. M. Forster was quickly being replaced by the eagerness to read the “Third World” authors. The term “Third World” literature was then connected to the issue of marginality and minority, which was considered a revolutionary and resistant sort of literature. The issues of canonicity, minority, marginality, and Third World literature in the context of America and Britain bring about a great deal of discussion that is beyond the scope of this paper, as this paper is concerned with the decolonisation of English literature in Iranian universities.

Ironically, however, the concept of canonical literature has been challenged, altered and expanded in most of the departments of literature in America and Britain. Authors from Africa, Asia, and Latin America made inroad to the departments of literary studies in America and Britain. Authors including Salam Rushdie, Raja Rao, V. S. Naipaul, Jumppa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjeje, Ngūgī wa Thiong'o, Nadine Gordimer, Chinua Achebe, Gabriel García Márquez, Roberto Bolaño, Paulo Coelho, and a lot more have made it to the curriculum of literary studies. However, there was an ulterior motive behind the inclusion of Muslim women’s memoirs. Without intending to suggest that the inclusion of Muslim
writings has always been political, it must, however, be pointed out that the inclusion of memoirs written by Muslim women has been a post-9/11 strategy of America and the West in a broader sense to sustain their superiority through depicting the plights of Muslim women living in Islamic societies narrated and related by Muslim women themselves. Memoirs such as Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) and Marjane Satrapi’s graphic memoir, *Persepolis* (2003), are part of a curriculum across North America in the disciplines of international relations, women’s studies, English studies, and anthropology, with course titles as varied as “Women and Islam,” “Understanding Totalitarianism,” “Understanding Culture and Cultural Difference,” and “Conflict and Gender.” These memoirs have been taken as a reflection of women’s oppression living under the Islamic republic and a lack of every kind of freedom since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The fact that these memoirs are now part of a curriculum at military and academic institutions in the West reveals the role of literary pieces in justifying the imperial rule and intervention in the Islamic societies.

To revert to the issues of decolonisation and inclusion in the context of Asia and Africa, it is interesting to note that one of the major concerns of Departments of English in the former colonised countries is including the national literature in English. For instance, Indian writing in English, Indian Literary Criticism, and Indian Diasporic Fiction are subjects that have gained momentum in the Departments of English across India. Poets and authors like Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, A. K. Ramanjuan, Imtiaz Dharkar, Mahesh Dattani, Amitav Ghosh, Bharat Muni, Jumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, and Kiran Desai are now part of the curriculum of English literature programmes. Another prominent example is the Department of English Literature at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, where its curriculum embraces African Literature and Language Studies. Besides reading their own South African poets, authors, and playwrights, such as Sol Plaatje, Zakes Mda, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Jacobs Rayda, and Lauretta Ngcobo, students benefit from reading authors from other parts of Africa, such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the Nigerian novelist. An outstanding example that best illustrates the decolonisation and inclusion is the University of Nairobi’s Department of Literature wherein Kenyan prose, Kenyan Drama and Poetry, Black Aesthetics, African Literature, Literature from India, China, Japan, Korea, and Russia are taught along with European Drama, British Literature, American Literature, and Canadian Literature. This department has been credited with the revolutionising of the literature curricula and syllabi, and set an example for the rise of African literature in the region. It all began when Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Taban Loliyong, Owuor Anyumba, and Okot Bitek wrote a

A memo entitled “On the Abolition of the English Department” (1968) and proposed the centrality of African literature in relation to English literature and cultures.

According to Ngugi wa Thiong’o, the colonial literature takes the natives further and further from themselves to other selves and from their world to other worlds (1981). This made him campaign frequently to change the name of his academic home at the University of Nairobi from the “Department of English” to the “Department of Literature,” a profound political move that is still relevant and inspiring. While this entire debate on decolonisation and inclusion has been rapidly progressing in the former colonies’ academic environment, Departments of English in Iran seem inattentive and unaware of such development as they still deal with the same canonical resources. The intellectuals and authorities of the Departments of English are apparently oblivious of the fact that “Literature in English” has become an international and global phenomenon in which writers from all over the world use English as a medium for poetry, fiction, and non-fiction genres. Writers from Africa, Asia, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada should be included in the syllabus. To argue that these writers cannot approximate the canonical authors is not true because the literary annals reveal otherwise. This is how we can expose our students to the world literature that encourages the multicultural facet of the literature in English. Literature in English can then create an authentic multiculturalism that entitles the non-American and non-British authors to a wider circle of readership, and assist us make meaningful literary connection among writers, literary movements, societies, and periods (Clausen, 1994). For the multicultural texts to be understood, of course, they “must be read in the light of prior knowledge, background information, expectations about genre and about sequence—all the aspects often considered together as ‘context’” (Dasenbrock, 1987: 10). There are many cultural specifications in the literary texts that often-times bring about misunderstandings and confusions.

That explains why I am not encouraging that we haphazardly choose writers from the four corners of the world and include them in the syllabus. Rather, I argue that we should make some criteria for selecting them. What Kenyan intellectuals stated about the selection criteria for inclusion of literature in Kenyan syllabus in 1981 holds true for the Iranian context. While encouraging the inclusion of literature from Latin America and Asia alongside African literature, they argue that the criteria for selection should be “literary excellence, social relevance, and narrative interest” (Ngugi wa Thiong’o, 1981: 99). In addition to these criteria, I am suggesting “intellectual merit” and “resistance element” of a text as two other criteria, for their presence in a text raises issues and challenges clichés and the fixed set of ideas. Given the nature of the Departments of English in Iran, I recommend the inclusion of
texts that are considered as “responses” to the British and American colonial and canonical literature because, without the cognisance of the responses, studying the canonical literature is nothing but obsolete. For instance, reading Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902) without Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is a perpetuation of racist stereotypes towards Africa and her people. The responses force us to an awareness to disentangle ourselves from the superior-inferior trap set up by imperialism. Although some departments of English have recently begun teaching “post-colonial literature” as part of their postgraduate programmes, especially at PhD level, this is by no means a general trend in Iranian universities. Very few universities in Tehran have accepted to swim against the literary tide and went so far to include one or two writers from Africa, India, and the Caribbean as a part of post-colonial literature.

This sort of literature should be included at the undergraduate level when students’ perspectives towards literature are by and large at the stage of shaping. Failure to include literature from other parts of the world at this stage makes the current status of English literature an imposed literature that subverts the students’ sense of collective identity, history, and nationhood. To promote authentic educational alternatives, we must consider utilising and accentuating our local authors. In this light and given that most of the Iranian students of the English Literature programme are not very familiar with their own literature, I recommend that attention should also be paid to Iranian writing in English or even Persian literature in translation. Our whole host of mystical authors such as Rumi, Sa'adi, Hafez, Ferdowsi, and Khayyam had a dramatic impact on the Western literature. Each of them was a Shakespeare in their own right and influenced many British and American poets and authors. Poets such as Donne, Blake, Wordsworth, Shelly, Arnold, Tennyson, Emerson, and Forster were influenced by Persian literature (Khojastehpor and Mirzababazadeh, 2014). Fitzgerald’s translation of Khayyam, Arbuthnot’s translation of Saadi’s *Gulistan*, the translation of Attar by Davis and Darbandi, Davis’ translation of *Shahnameh*, Arbery’s translation of Rumi reveals the magnificent interest of Western literati in Persian literature. Emerson’s statements of “The Eastern poetry I looked through, but find Persians still the best by far …” (quoted in Porte, Letters IV: 531) and “it would be hard to put more mental and moral philosophy than the Persians have thrown into sentences” (quoted in Porte, 1983: 1123) are indicative of his fascination with Persian literature. Plus, contemporary poets and authors including Forough Farrokhzad, Simin Behbahani, Parvin Etesami, Sohrab Sepehri, Ahmad Shamloo, Mahmoud Dowlatabadi, Sadegh Hedayat, Iraj Pezeshkzad, and Bozorg Alavi have always been of interest in the “Literary Studies” programmes in America, Canada, Britain, and Australia. In
this vein, I argue that Persian literature in English translation should also be accommodated in the “Literature in English” curriculum and syllabus in Iran not because it is part of the literary syllabi in the West, but because a sort of enslavement creeps up if you know all the languages and literature of the world but you are not aware of your own culture and literature.

If the English Literature programme is going to be replaced with the “Literary Studies” or “World Literature in English,” the absence of Persian literature in English translation would be conspicuously felt. The inclusion of literature about one’s own culture, tradition, experience, joys, and sorrows is the *sine qua non* for decolonising the English literature programmes. Beside the Persian literature in English translation, diasporic Iranian literature in English also deserves a place in the syllabus. This sort of literature has collectively preoccupied the attention of scholars and readers since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the Hostage Crisis, and the events of 9/11. It “occupies an ambivalent discursive space, constructed at the junctions of Iranian history and literatures and Western literatures and philosophies” (Fotouhi, 2015: 7). Being aware of its vulnerability in perpetrating and perpetuating Orientalist stereotypes, I am cautioning against any inadvertent selection. Diasporic texts that deal with immigration, exile, Islamic fundamentalism, and women’s rights can be dangerously co-opted in bolstering the Western generalisations and assumptions about Iran, Iranians, and Muslims at large. Given the close relationship of this sort of literature with the social, political, and historical upheavals, this body of work can justify the imperial intervention and presence in Islamic societies (Dabashi, 2011). It is, however, dismissive to reduce all these works to justifications for imperialism; what put them at the service of imperialism are their exaggerated, one-sided and out-of-context accounts. At the other side of the spectrum, there are diasporic literary works that are meritorious enough to be given a place in the syllabus. For instance, Fatemeh Keshavarz’s *Jasmine and Stars* (2007) is an interesting read that was written in response to Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) and memoirs of that ilk, and subvert the “us” and “them” demarcations.

Departments of English in Iran seem to be unaware of the relevancy of including Muslim fiction in English. It is an established literary tradition emerged in early 1900s through the publication of a short story, *Sultana’s Dream* (1905), by a Bengali woman, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932), but it assumed recognition and prominence with Ahmed Ali’s publication of *Twilight in Delhi* (1940). Being a Muslim country, Iranian universities should adopt in their curricula the literary works of Muslim writers for their relevancy in terms of culture, tradition, and religion. Less cited but a very prominent and pioneer Muslim writer that deserves the inclusion is Ameen Rihani (1876-1940) whose
writings in English mark the beginning of a literature that is Muslim in its concern, culture, and traits but English in language. He is the first Lebanese Arab that wrote English poetry, novels, essay, short stories, and art critiques. His *The Book of Khalid* (1911) is amongst the first few novels written by a Muslim in English and is the foundation of Muslim American literature. His collection of poetry *Myrtle and Myrrh* (1905) and *A Chant of Mystics and Other Poems* (1921) are amongst the first English poetry collections written by a Muslim. His writings generally seek to reconcile the binary paradigms of East/West. His relevancy can be more accentuated in his stand against the Zionist lobbying in establishing a separate state in Palestine (http://www.ameenrihani.org). Anchored within such relevancy, the Palestinian writer, Sahar Khalifeh, also gains significance and should be given a space in the curricula and syllabi. Her two novels of *Wild Thorns* (1976) and *The End of Spring* (2008) reveal her resistance to the Israeli occupation of Palestine. As it has been noted earlier, I am not suggesting that we should ignore the Anglo-American literary figures and replace them with Muslim writers as this would be parochial too, and generates another “ism” like Occidentalism or even Islamism. As Said (1995: 318) states:

The question is not whether we should read more black literature or less literature by white men. The issue is excellence—we need everything, as much as possible, for understanding the human adventure in its fullest, without resorting to enormous abstractions and generalisations, without replacing Euro-centrism with other varieties of ethnocentrism, or, say, Islamo-centrism or Afro-centrism or gynocentrism.

The suggestion here is to celebrate Muslim writers along with both classical and contemporary Anglo-American writers for the erasure of superior-inferior impression. Muslim writers cannot and should not be excluded from the cultural and academic arenas as they have been actively involved in the literary endeavours and now has a distinctive corpus of literary work. By including the Muslim writings in English, the Literary Studies programmes in Iran cease to celebrate the superiority of the Anglo-American literature, and enhance the status of Muslim writers through disseminating their works among their students. Just like the diasporic Iranian literature in English, Muslim writing in English is also susceptible to fall into the trap of imperialism through its continuation of Orientalist stereotypes. Therefore, I am suggesting that writings that “subvert the binary paradigms of self/other, us/them, East/West toward a mature inclusivist ethos of both/and, without indulging in reductionist platitudes …” (Malak, 2005: 12) can be cordially embraced to be
offered a spot in the curricula and syllabi. The maturity and sophistication in some Muslim writings shatter the prejudiced cliché representation of Muslims and shrink the Western created concept of “imaginative geography” in an attempt to bridge the binary opposition of East-West. As a finale note, its inclusion means a serious consideration of the cultural realities of the students and learners that can take the process of decolonisation to its ultimate conclusion. This whole transformation enables the education to “resist oppression and domination by strengthening the individual self and the collective consciousness to deal with the …. imperial structures of … knowledge production and validation” and help the students to better comprehend “indigeneity” and “the pursuit of agency, resistance and politics of pedagogical change” (Sefa Dei and Asgharzadeh, 2003: 421-422).

Conclusion
The inclusion of literature in English from other parts of the world into the curriculum and syllabi of the English Literature programmes in Iran does not allow for the superiority of Anglo-American canonical literature. This renovated and revamped English literature curriculum escapes the confinements of English and American literature and gallops towards an understanding and awareness of world literature in English. The introduction of the plethora of literatures in English emerging from around the world helps the students become aware of the richness of contemporary world literature in English. “Literature in English” or “Literary Studies” ensures that the Anglo-American writings of Africa, Asia, and Latin America continue being studied alongside the responses produced in these areas and their writings of America and Britain. The transformation of the curriculum from a predominant Anglo-American discourse towards the world literature in English curriculum repudiates a common assumption that English Literature is texts produced by English authors. That the world literature in English cannot be identified with any single national literature erases the possibility of lionising and maximising the importance of literature or culture from a particular country. This transformation and inclusion of literature from other parts of the world challenges the imperialist agendas in creating the captive minds and it endangers its epistemological hegemonies. As a result of this curriculum transformation, English literature loses its functionality to support and sustain the academic imperialism.

References


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