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Teaching Islam through Literature: A Recommended List of Books

Youshaa Patel, *Lafayette College*

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My primary objective as a professor is to nurture my students' ability to think critically. Given the rising tide of Islamophobia and the increasingly acerbic rhetoric targeting Muslims in national political discourses, however, I consider developing their empathy and compassion an additional imperative. In my courses, I have increasingly turned to literature, especially novels, to achieve both objectives.

Literary modes such as myth and narrative have long been a feature of religious traditions. Stories are (usually) more engaging than academic jargon. Stories make us human. They express our shared humanity by establishing a plane of relatability between characters and readers. Through this relationship, readers may gain a perspective very different from their own.

Literature makes the strange familiar: Muslims turn from stereotyped one-dimensional figures to complex human beings whose lives and identities are shaped by more than just religion. Students learn to avoid limiting Muslims to a single story. Through the transformations that a story's characters inevitably experience, students witness how religious identity intersects with race, gender, class, sexuality, nationality, and ethnicity. It becomes apparent that Muslim identity is not static but fluid; and that not all Muslims are alike. Their trajectories are varied and diverse. These insights are essential for affirming the humanity of Muslims at home or abroad.

Literary works can be incorporated into any course on Islam. In addition to including novels, plays and autobiographies into my introductory courses on Islam and the Quran, I have developed a dedicated course (“Global Muslim Literature and Film”) where students read books and watch films about Muslims from different regions of the world in order to encounter the global diversity of Muslim cultures.

In what follows, I provide a recommended list of books that I have used in my courses that you may find useful:

Disgraced (2012) by Ayad Akhtar

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for drama, this controversial play is my favorite work of modern literature on Islam and Muslims. I was fortunate to first watch it performed live on Broadway, where I was introduced to Akhtar’s genius. The Quran takes center stage in a heated debate at a dinner party over its connection to violence, gender, and politics. It becomes apparent that the main character—a self-proclaimed Muslim apostate—interprets the Qur’an primarily through the lens of his own self-loathing. Illuminating how individual personality and social context shape a sacred text’s meaning and interpretation, the play is a profound meditation on modern Muslim identity. I assign this play in my courses on “The Quran” and “Interreligious Cooperation and Conflict.”

The Gigantic Beard that Was Evil (2013) by Stephen Collins

This graphic novel is not about Islam or Muslims – at least explicitly. It centers around the character, Dave, who lives in a place called “Here,” which is separated by the sea from a place called “There.” Here is characterized by conformity, cleanliness, regularity and order. There is portrayed as everything Here is not; it is chaotic and dangerous, a place to be feared. One day, a beard appears on the clean-shaven face of Dave, and refuses to stop growing. Dave comes to embody the chaos of There. He becomes a threat to national security. Labeled a “terrorist,” Dave is finally forced into exile. The story challenges the boundaries that humans draw between here and there, us and them, self and other. As allegory, the novel’s message is easily applicable to the precarious situation of Muslims living in the West. I assign this book in my course on “Global Muslim Literature and Film” to set up a theoretical framework for engaging Muslim cultures.

Autobiography of Malcolm X (1965) by Malcolm X

A book that every American should read, the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* is a remarkable work of literature and a window into modern Islam through one of America’s most important civil rights heroes. Malcolm X’s powerful message of resistance to oppression still resonates today. I have taught this book in my introductory course on Islam in order to highlight the contributions of black Muslims to American history. I highlight Malcolm X’s spiritual transformations in jail and during Hajj to demonstrate the fluidity of his religious identity.

The Moor’s Account (2015) by Laila Lalami

This work of historical fiction narrates the imagined memoirs of the first black explorer of America - a Muslim enslaved by a Spanish conquistador seeking gold in America. Lalami challenges entrenched perceptions that Muslims are new to America by narrating a richly detailed story set in the 16th century of one Muslim's journey to freedom and redemption. It is a story that history has forgotten, but Lalami seeks to revive. I taught this book for the first time this semester (Spring 2016) in my course on "Global Muslim Literature and Film" with great success.

Hadji Murat (1912) by Leo Tolstoy

Many do not know that Tolstoy's final novel, published posthumously, centered around a Muslim character - the historical figure of Hadji Murat whom Tolstoy heard about while serving in the military. In his portrayal of the feared Chechen warrior, Tolstoy aims to humanize the Muslim other and offer a moral critique on the tragedy of war that is as timely today as it was when he first wrote it.

1000 Splendid Suns (2007) by Khaled Hosseini

The worldwide bestseller weaves an absorbing narrative around the tragedies and triumphs of two Afghan women born into very different circumstances but whose lives are intertwined. The novel helps the reader to imagine the real life consequences of U.S. foreign intervention and to appreciate the challenges facing Afghan women. Many students in my course, "Global Muslim Literature and Film," considered this novel to be their favorite.

The Season of Migration to the North (1966) by Tayeb Salih

Considered by some as the most important Arabic novel of the twentieth century, this story, set in a village of 1960's Sudan, explores the lingering psychic, social and cultural violence that colonialism unleashed upon Africans - a violence that comes back to infect Europe through the very subjects it had colonized. The recurring inability of the narrator to take action throughout the novel is reminiscent of Albert Camus' character, Meursault, in the French existential classic, *The Stranger*.

Zeitoun (2009) by David Eggers

Best selling author, David Eggers, narrates the true story of how two Muslim protagonists heroically survive Hurricane Katrina. Zeitoun, a Syrian immigrant, is married to Kathy, a white American convert to Islam. Despite warnings to flee New Orleans prior to the hurricane's arrival, Zeitoun chooses to stay; Kathy and their children leave. After the hurricane passes, Zeitoun, who believes he is fulfilling God's will, risks his personal well-being to assist those in need. However, when military personnel finally arrive, they accuse him of associating with terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda, before arresting and imprisoning him. This tragic event transforms Zeitoun, leading to a downward spiral that continues even after Eggers' novel ends. I have assigned this book in my introductory courses on Islam.

Samarkand (1988) by Amin Maalouf

Originally written in French, *Samarkand* is a fictional retelling of the life of medieval poet-astronomer, Omar Khayyam, and the life of his *Rubaiyat*, or quatrains, that were said to be among the lost treasures of the Titanic. Edward Fitzgerald translated the *Rubaiyat* into English, which became a bestseller in 19th century Victorian England, anticipating the popularity of Coleman Barks' translations of Rumi's poetry in the United States today. The historical novel vividly depicts life in medieval Persia during the Seljuk period and portrays a relatable figure in Omar Khayyam.

Alif: The Unseen (2012) by G. Willow Wilson

Set in an imaginary City in the contemporary Middle East, this fast-paced novel narrates the adventure of an Arab-Indian hacker who is chased by state security after his secret operations on the internet are discovered. In his fight for survival, he encounters jinn, who are created beings made from smokeless fire according to the Quran. Confounding boundaries between seen and unseen, virtual and real, Wilson's book gives readers a glimpse of Muslim life during the Arab Spring.

Domestic Crusaders (2010) by Wajahat Ali

This short play is a poignant and humorous portrayal of a Pakistani-American family spanning three generations. Each family member is a "crusader" for their respective cause amidst the backdrop of 9-11 and increased suspicion and scrutiny of Muslims in America. I have assigned this play in my introductory course on Islam to highlight the experiences of American Muslim immigrants.

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