

Contemporary American Literature and Postmodernism from Islamic Perspectives

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Abstract – Teaching literature for second language learners would be a challenging job due to language barrier and misinterpretation of ideas especially when the text is not in the same culture, belief and understanding shared between the author and reader. This paper is a study on a content analysis of a contemporary American literature written by an avid postmodernist who has received a well-known acknowledgement by American poets and critics. The researcher chose Sarah Groham's *Bad Daughter* to investigate the link between contemporary American literature and Islamic views, to analyze the text using the concept of postmodernism and most importantly to prove that all literary texts can be analyzed in educational approach as long as the analysis will not jeopardize the learner's understanding towards his religion. This approach is parallel with the concept of postmodernism in literature.

Keywords – postmodernism; contemporary American literature; Islamic

1. Introduction

Why teaching literature?

There are many complicated definition of literature, however, the researcher agrees that literature as "...the imaginative shaping of life and thought into the forms and structures of language." If life, thought and imagination are missing, the language alone will not suffice (Ghosn, 2002). It is supported by Carlisle (2000) who also highlights that literature or literary text can bridge, to a large extent, the acute realization of the cultural differences that is eating into our understanding of normal and natural human differences. By exposing second language learners to literature, students not only become more creative in language but also in world view of literature.

According to Carlisle (2000) literature represents a language or a people, culture and tradition but it is more important than just a historical or cultural artifact. Literature introduces us to new worlds of experience. We learn about books and literature and we enjoy the comedies and the tragedies of poems, stories, and plays. Furthermore, we may even grow and evolve through our literary journey with books. Ultimately, we may discover meaning in literature by looking at what the author says and how he says it. In academic circles, this decoding of the text is often carried out through the use of literary theory, using a mythological, sociological, psychological, historical, or other approach. Whatever critical paradigm we use to discuss and analyze literature, there is still an artistic quality to the works (Ghosn, 2002). Literature is

important to us because it speaks to us, it is universal, and it affects us. Carlisle (2000) adds "Even when it is ugly, literature is beautiful."

Sire (1990) states that the key to reading literature well is to read world view. A great challenge of teaching and analyzing literature is to identify the meanings in the text and to enjoy learning it in which the learners feel has no relevance to their lives. Commonly practice (structural approach), we analyze literary text based on the poet's point of view, stereotyped opinion or follow a majority of analysis done by others. It is considered as a fake reading (Richard, 2001).

According to Rychlak (2003), postmodernist discourses come in various forms. They include and are not limited to postcolonial narratives, literary theory and its criticism, poststructuralist analysis, postmodern feminism, deconstruction, genealogies, archaeologies of history and often simple cultural relativist arguments that reject rationality and rationalism. Furthermore, because of their diversity, it is difficult to describe what postmodern discourses really are. They are not grand narratives which claim justification on the basis of some transcendent ethic or infallible reason and boast of validity across time and space. Postmodern narratives take pride in their cultural and historically specific character. In conclusions, postmodernist literature is characterized by its focus on individualism and the common man, globalization and multiculturalism, sharing beliefs and convictions and realism and countercultures. Therefore, taken into consideration all the challenges of the varied and misinterpretation of postmodernism, the researcher attempts to analyze a contemporary American

literature from the view of postmodernism but in this case, from the Islamic view. This is in line with Ahmad (1992) who stresses that “the postmodernist condition corresponds to the collage of images and ideas that represent it – ironic, iconoclastic and free floating. It declares its scopes as universal; it embraces high – and – low- brow, the serious and frivolous with equal zest (p.10)”

Purposes of the study

The researcher has chosen a content analysis on literary criticism of Groham's *Bad Daughter* to be studied based on researcher's exposure being in the USA studying contemporary American literature in which he has fallen in love to Groham's poems which are unique and very postmodernized. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to link between contemporary American literature and Islamic views, to analyze the texts using the concept of postmodernism and most importantly to prove that all literary texts can be analyzed in educational approach as long as the analysis will not jeopardize the learner's understanding towards his religion. Considering the fact that postmodernism is concerned with questions of the organization of knowledge and mass media generally and literature in this case specifically, has a significant effect on shaping people's knowledge, attitude and interest toward a subject and that the poems produced in this genre such as Groham's *Bad Daughter* were often best sellers and have received positive reviews, this paper examines the way how Muslims and their ideologies are represented in the contemporary literature. In *Bad Daughter*, Groham uses simple lines of poems which easy to understand and opens to wide discussions. It is in line with the concept of postmodernism where “Poetry would go a long way in providing language learners with the expansion of their experience of larger human reality which in turn can shape his language and provide more meaning and richness to it” Slaton (2001).

In order to digest the poems from the view of postmodernists, first and foremost, we need to understand the meaning of several important terminologies. Postmodernism is a complicated term, or set of ideas, one that has only emerged as an area of academic study since the mid-1980s. Slaton (2001) points out that postmodernism is hard to define, because it is a concept that appears in a wide variety of disciplines or areas of study, including art, architecture, music, film, literature, sociology, communications, fashion, and technology. It is hard to locate it temporally or historically, because it is not clear exactly when postmodernism begins. Contemporary period of American literature includes an abundance of important American literary figures spanning from World War II into the New Millennium. Some researchers also believe that the era did not begin until the 1970s due to societal changes. However, others argue that postmodernism and contemporary literatures are the same, emerging in the 1950s. Evidently, certain genre fiction such as sci-fi and romance are often outcast from

contemporary literature. The literature is distinguishable by a high standard of writing in beauty, composition, significance, and style (as compared to pulp or popular fiction) (Detweiler, 2000). It questions our ability to accurately see and understand ourselves and our culture emphasizes the crossing of old boundaries (men and women, east and west, high and low culture), represents migration and immigration as a fundamental human experience, asserts that the nature of our identities is not true or natural, but seem to be because of consistency and persistence (Lewis, 2007). At times, it also shows struggle to find meaning a world of new and evolving science and religion and creates a link between language and reality in which everything is a biased representation. Both, postmodernism and contemporary literatures are heavily influenced by severe scientific and technological advances in the 20th century where by the genres and themes are narratives: fiction and nonfiction, autobiographical essays, anti-heroes, motion-provoking, humorous, irony, misery, depression, and disillusionment. They also have the elements of interconnectedness of people; media culture interprets values and societal customs and beliefs (Rychlak, 2003).

Groham's *Bad Daughter* has 3 chapters with 48 poems and five major themes that is illegitimate child, free sex (living out of wedlock), the roles of parents, feminism and death. *Bad Daughter* explores misbehavior of a woman who lives in risky pleasures and often ends with tragic consequences. The poems mostly discuss “bad” daughters, sisters, and their mothers whose stress on daughters or sister who disobeys the rules (Detweiler, 2000). Gorham adopts several lyric forms of morality tales, ironic prayers, and scaled-down sonnets, sharp meditations on concepts such as envy, detachment, and immortality to show that the self as forged by generations of women and girls is both subversive and enduring. For example, in *Birthday*, it is about the transition of one's life from teenager to adult life, how the poet exposes her rebellious and immature attitude towards her life. The persona in the poem also shows her preparation towards transition (from teen age to adult) which reflects her sudden realization and eagerness to proceed to a new life. Obviously, it is about the end of student's life and the beginning of working life. As a postmodernist, the poet provokes the emotion of the reader even though usually humorless and full of narratives.

Second example, in *Immortality*, the poet shows the envy of youngness which is the beauty of the young, the freshness of being young symbolic, the charming of the youth age, ageist (discrimination of age), youth is charm and beautiful. She also reveals that old is hideous and weary and age convergence. She is able to influence the reader that the persona converging herself from being adult to be baby based on the tones used to address the baby. Interestingly, she is able to explain the scientific approach in explaining the phase of the baby's growth where the sex is unidentified at first and also the beauty stereotyping as described in “she is naked, skin like

spun sugar, fingers pink fiddleheads". From other point of view, the line "The baby is a drug, for she makes us hungry and delirious", describes the intoxicating bliss of motherhood, while another insists on a sort of opposite such as "When your daughter matures, the tree must be sacrifice, A phoenix will alight there, only when the queen steps down, You must step down." Therefore, full elements of postmodernism are about the concern to individual, ageist, magic realism, connection between people and as usual it is in present tense.

Analyzing Contemporary American Literature using the concept of Postmodernism based on Islamic Views

Since the researcher analyzes the poems from the Islamic views, it is essential to briefly understand what the meaning of Islam is. At the core of Muslim identity is a status as worshippers of Allah which is clearly stated in Surah Az-zariyat 51:56 "I have only created jinn and men that they may serve (worship) me". Hence, Muslim identity viewed as a function of community, tradition and history, personal piety, daily life, geographic location and relationships and society. Islam means submission to the Will of Allah. This implies faith, doing right, being an example to others to do right, and having the power to see that the right prevails, eschewing wrong, being an example to others to eschew wrong, and having the power to see that wrong and injustices are defeated (Anwar, 2005). Islam, therefore, lives, not for itself, but for mankind. In summary, Muslim personal identity is bound up with communal identity: both are located and contextualized within the bounds of time and space. Therefore, taking into consideration of analyzing Groham' poems, the researcher digests the strengths of the poems in applying to teaching them in Islamic education, so that, their Muslim self-identity would be better understood and accepted by non-Muslims. The poems have all the elements of life which are stressed by Imam al-Ghazali who analyzed the aspect of the self that seeks only to fulfill its base needs, calling it *nafs al amara* (the animal self) and *nafs al lawwama* (the repenting-self).

Major Themes Discussed in Groham's Bad Daughter

There are many postmodern themes discussed in Groham's Bad Daughter, however, the researcher only highlights some important ones which are closely related to contemporary issues from Islamic perspectives.

Free Sex

There are poems where Groham discusses the issues of free sex or living without boundary of religion, for examples: We are bold to say,

Birthday, Prick and Twinge, Sixteen. In The end of illness is the end of metaphor she highlights "Enough for her and the soldier, officers, the entire village, even" to portray the element of free sex in life. In Islam, the only acceptable way for sexual satisfaction in Islam is a lawful "marriage". In fact, Islam urges Muslims to seek marriage and encourages them to practice it. Prophet Muhammad said "whoever is financially capable of marriage but does not marry; he does not belong to Me" (Al-Baihaqi).

Illegitimate child

Second theme is the issue of illegitimate child. For examples in You bother me, Lost, Floating city, Vague. In Floaters the poet uses "The fear in a mother's voice that you'll never be useful or clean". This line indicates the agony faced by the child after knowing that she is an illegitimate child and she feels that she is dirty. An indisputable tenet of Islamic faith is that no person will share in the sin of another unless that person was directly involved in encouraging or assisting the other person to commit the sin. Allah says: "That no soul shall bear the burden of another and that a person shall have nothing but what he strives for" (Surah al-Najm: 38-39). Also, Allah says: "On no soul does Allah place a burden greater than it can bear. It shall have the good that it earns, and against it shall be the ill that it earns." (Surah al-Baqarah: 286). Prophet Muhammad stressed that "Marriage is my tradition. He, who rejects my tradition is not of me" (Bukhari, Muslim). "Marriage is half of religion. The other half is being God-fearing" (Tabarani, Hakim).

The roles of parents

The next theme is the roles of parents, where the poet stresses in Salon, Barbecue, Bob white, Three sides to the mountain that are really one. In On the birth of a daughter Groham uses "When your daughter matures, the tree must be sacrificed" to show how big the responsibilities of parents have. Groham writes in Homesickness "What is a mother but a tooth's way of producing another toothand"? And "To my child I became my mother, and her mother and her" in Accommodation to show the bond between parents and daughter. In Islam, a family institution is very important in which Prophet Muhammad said "no child is born except on Al-Fitra (Islam) and then his parents make him Jewish, Christian or Magian" (Abu Huraira). Therefore, in Islam the roles of parents in Islam are to raise the children and educate children for having good Islamic behaviors, to teach their children for having good understanding of Islam, to give good example of practicing the obligation of Muslim such as praying, fasting, to take care children until they are grown up and mature for being independence and discipline in their lives, to give advice if their children show the

wrong way or bad behavior and to teach their children to respect, love and help the parents and others (Rippin, 1993).

Death

The forth theme in Groham's *Bad Daughter* is death. It is clearly addressed in *Soakaway*, after pindar, *Prayer during a fast*. In *Floaters*, the phrase "A mere blink sweeps them away, but they return, for their verb is to meddle" shows the confusion of accepting death and catastrophe in life. The poems also stresses the unstable of family institution for example *High Tea* uses this same sort of strategy, interspersing snatches of conversation about a possible murder with the details of an uncomfortable family meal. Although the lines is beautifully captured the naivety and innocence of children in the wake of death such as "I dare you to kick her shin. I dare you. She's kicking me. She's a stupid ass. You're a stupid ass", the element of death is highlighted as well. The German philosopher Goethe wrote, "If Islam means submission to the will of God, then in Islam we all live and die." This succinctly summarizes the goal of Muslims which is to live and die in accordance with God's will as revealed in the Quran and practiced by the Prophet. Death is a question of ultimate concern for every human being, and Islam has a very vivid portrayal of the stages of death and the afterlife (Rychlak, 2003). Saliba (2007) highlights that Prophet Muhammad spoke often of death, and the Quran is filled with warnings of the dangers of ignoring one's mortality and of not preparing for death before it is too late.

Feminism

The last theme in Groham's *Bad Daughter* is feminism. Obviously, poems such as *Ice storm*, *Passeggiata*, *Dusk*, *Pond in winter* discuss this issue. The line in *Accommodation* "To my husband I'm capable, for he is incapable and were he capable I would not know what to do with myself" indicates the concept of being feminist and wanting to control a situation. In addition, in *Dopplegange* Groham writes about the difference of a girl being seen as "Sky Violet" while acting like "Sky Violence." It is about a girl who refused to be the grown-up so that she would be able to do whatever she liked. She also did not like men to enter her 'territory'. Saliba (2007) says it is mentioned in many surahs that woman and men are ought to be treated equally; as God (Allah) has created us from, basically the same earth. There is a surah Al Nisa: 4: "O mankind! Reverence your Guardian-Lord, who created you from a single person, created, of like nature, His mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women; - reverence Allah, through whom ye demand your mutual (rights), and (reverence) the wombs (That bore you): for Allah ever watches over you."

CONCLUSIONS

Groham's *Bad Daughter* is a very good example of postmodern text which has a high value of multiplicity of the self from two different analyses – western and Muslim interpretation. The poems are about humans interact with their imaginations as well as their memories using a role of a daughter (might be granddaughter) or sister or a mother. The poems are relevant to be brought into current education as an added value not only to the education itself but as in learning literature as highlighted by Melucci (1996) whom overwhelming with the idea of description of multiplicity of the self usually stress the variations of the self over time and the discontinuities among the identifications forced upon us by rapid change. Although Sarah Groham's *Bad Daughter* is accepted under the understanding of western culture and fits into contemporary American literature, using the concept of postmodernism, it can be analyzed using Islamic views in molding Muslim self-identity and most importantly can be used in literature teaching. It is hope that in the contemporary context of postmodernism and religious pluralism, this concept of analyzing poems through postmodernism view would be able to prove that Islam can stand out as a religion with a strong self-identity and an ideological profile that sits comfortably with the postmodern age. Hence, Islam would be able to be presented and discussed in the contemporary western or American world of literature. Evidently, the approach is more globalized and fruitful to be analyzed and post-modernized.

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Vitae



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