

Islam and Literature (revised)

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Art, science and literature

Literature is a collection of writing on a particular topic or specific area, with the purpose of conveying knowledge or awareness of one kind or another to the reader. There is literature as *art* as well as literature on the subject of *science*.

Literature as *art* differs from scientific literature in important ways. This is due to differences between art and science, which are different ways of attaining and expressing insight about reality. Man requires knowledge for the purpose of guidance, as well as for cultivating the earth.

Science is classified into natural (empirical) science and social science. Natural science looks at the world of nature. Social science, by contrast, focuses on man and society. Religious sciences comprise the study of sacred text, beliefs, ethics, languages, commentary, jurisprudence, history and other, related subjects.

Natural science seeks to understand, explain and to *transform* the world. Its aim is to make life better in the material sense. Art, by contrast, seeks to comprehend, explain and *educate* man. Together, art and science help the cause of mankind. In other words, art and science complement one another.

Art seeks to capture and express the sublime. It cultivates a person to become a better human being. It does this by acquainting him or her with works of art. The highest objective of art is to convey to man the highest truth. The power of art to educate – and indeed to *reform* man – is due to its ability to communicate, in a literary manner, the knowledge conveyed to man by means of revelation.

Unlike science, art speaks directly to the heart. By educating individuals, art can help reform society. However, art can reform society in other ways, too. It can do this, for example, by alerting readers to the plight of the poor and the marginalised, and in this way highlighting the need for reform.

There are many kinds of arts. Visual arts include calligraphy, painting, and sculpture. Performing arts include music, drama, and film. Art can be categorised in many ways. One such way is to classify it according to the period in which it emerged. Thus we speak of classical, medieval or romantic art.

Art can be also classified into Umayyad, Abbasid, Persian, and Ottoman art, each exhibiting significantly different features and characteristics of their own. The Islamic civilisation produced a notable literary legacy that includes the works of Hafez, Rumi, Iqbal and others.

The methodology for discovering knowledge in the sciences is encapsulated in what is known as the “scientific method.” But what is the methodology of capturing and expressing insight by art?

In general, art is intuitive while science tends to be rational. Art communicates an articulation of reality to the viewer or the reader in a different way than science does.

Science observes, measures, records, discovers patterns and predicts outcomes. The scientist takes primarily an intellectual (rational) approach, while the artist relies heavily on intuition (feelings). This does not mean, however, that science can dispense with the imagination, or that art can do without precision.

While art does not appear to have any immediate practical use, the knowledge generated by scientific research is generally viewed as eminently useful and practical. The purpose of art, however, is not merely to entertain; it also has a didactic or educational purpose. For example, children learn through stories. Good stories are interesting and easy to comprehend.

The heart of every good story is a lesson about ethics. This “lesson” is popularly known as “the moral of the story.” Indeed, the “moral” of the story constitutes the most important part of every story, its *ethical teaching*. A story without a “moral” is of limited value. Such a story is unlikely to make any lasting or good impression on the reader.

Literature in culture and civilisation

Literature as art takes the form of poetry, stories or drama. Every nation has its own literature. This literature captures and expresses the unique identity of each nation. Poetry is written in verses that rhyme, which give expression to feelings. Poetry is a part of literature but not all literature is poetry. The greater part of literature as art comprises inspirational works in the form of prose: short stories and novels.

Much literature takes the form of a response to the social conditions prevailing in a particular historical period. The form and manner of presentation depend in part on the specific talents and proclivities of the artist.

It is neither possible nor desirable to separate literature from its social and historical context. In that sense, all literature is “historical.” This does not mean, however, that literature cannot express what is known as “timeless truth,” or insight that transcends the limitations of a particular time and place.

Classical literature emphasises tradition, respect for elders, order, duties, and a sense balance, harmony and hierarchy. Medieval literature gave expression to religious feelings and devotion. The Romantic movement, by contrast, emphasised love, the family, the individual and spontaneity. These periods reflect different stages in history.

Literature as an art form – fiction, non-fiction or science fiction – communicates important ideas to readers. These ideas collectively make up what can be termed as the “meaning” of a given work of art. “Meaning” may be defined as a specific conception of reality and of man’s place in the world.

These conceptions compete with one another for the allegiance of man. “Meaning” takes the form of a “worldview.” This worldview is expressed in the way various characters interact with one another and with the environment in which they find themselves, how they respond to the many challenges that face them.

Awareness of his or her community’s worldview enables a person to fit in better. The worldview teaches him or her his duties, his place, responsibilities, what he can expect, what he must or must not do and how to conduct himself or herself both in public and in private. A major challenge in life is to attain knowledge and apply it.

The invention and utilisation of the printing press has made it possible to disseminate literature (as well as other writing) on an unprecedented scale. This enabled a greater number of people to become knowledgeable. The arrival of the Internet is having an even greater impact. By connecting to the Internet, persons with computers can access information, including literature, from just about every corner of the world.

With the emergence of globalisation, significant democratisation of communication has taken place. This offers opportunities but also presents risks. Opportunities include producing new art forms, and reaching ever-greater numbers of people. The risk is that excellent literature may get buried under a heap of mediocre material.

Literature has an important role to play, in both culture and civilisation. The difference between the literature of a culture and that of a civilisation is that the appeal of culturally determined (vernacular) literature tends to be limited to members of a given ethnic group, while the literature of a civilisation transcends tribal differences and speaks with universal appeal. Great literature is “borderless.”

Each civilisation has its own literature. This literature reflects the identity of the civilisation, and helps to maintain its cohesiveness over time. The books that a given civilisation cherishes tell a great deal about that civilisation. Which books form a part of the curriculum in its institutions of learning and how they are treated likewise indicates a much about that civilisation.

A strong civilisation upholds and follows the best books available to it. Where books of lesser quality take the place of the “best” books, or inhibit access to them, the civilisation may experience decline.

Upholding the best books requires in the first place knowing how to tell the difference between an excellent book and a book that falls short in one way or another. In other words, it requires critical thinking. Where critical thinking is absent or poorly developed, people may be unable to tell the difference between excellent and mediocre books, and become disoriented (confused) as a result. It is the responsibility of knowledgeable persons to call the attention of their fellow human beings to the best books.

On account of the competition in writing and publishing, one may perhaps speak of “a battle of the books.” Looked at more closely, however, this “battle” turns out to be a battle of “ideas,” both *good* and *bad*. All ideas or ideologies compete for the allegiance of man. In so far as man’s destiny depends on what he commits himself to – what book or books he or she follows – it becomes important to know how to tell the difference between good and bad, books as well as ideas.

Good literature

Good literature can help educate man, and thereby enhance his prospects of success, both in this life and in the hereafter. Such literature is guided by revealed knowledge. Literature alerts man to the major ethical choices in life and facilitates a fuller realisation of man’s potential. It addresses deeper questions of ethics and human existence.

Reading literature can help the reader acquire virtues and avoid or abandon vices. Literature should make virtues attractive and vices reprehensible to the reader. Virtues include, but are not limited to piety, gratitude, sincerity, moderation, honesty, respect for parents, patience, and kindness to the less fortunate. Vices include but are not restricted to

impiety, lack of gratitude, hypocrisy, immoderation, dishonesty, insolence, impatience, and cruelty.

Literature offers a non-coercive way of teaching ethics, by showing the consequences of making different choices. This teaching process takes place within the context of a story. Good choices bring good results; bad choice generally mean disaster.

One example is turning to a life of crime. A novel can show that “crime does not pay,” by showing the consequences of a criminal lifestyle. Criminals end up in prison or worse. They reap the fruits of what they have sown.

Reading appeals to *fitrah* or human nature. People respond to and are moved by stories. In order to be truly internalised (learned), knowledge needs to be apprehended not only intellectually but also in some sense “experienced.” In Islam, sufis (mystics) distinguish between mere knowledge (*ilm*) and a higher form of cognition in the form of the *experience* of knowledge (*ma'rifa*).

At the ordinary level, the difference between learning from a textbook and learning from experience can be compared to the difference between a person who is merely warned about playing with fire, with one who was not only warned but also experiences getting burned. A burning sensation leaves a lasting impression. A person who experienced getting burned is unlikely to forget his experience.

In order to capture and retain the attention of readers, literature needs to be *interesting*. Interest is aroused by addressing what can be termed as the “universal” human condition. These almost invariably centre on moral issues, in particular on the *struggle between good and evil and the moral choices open to man*.

Literature explores various archetypes and contrasts them to each other, sometimes by casting them as antagonists. Good literature alerts the reader to the difference between good and evil and to draws him or her to join the struggle on the side of the good. The writer should make good characters attractive and worthy of emulation. Bad characters, by contrast, should be cast in a poor light, so that readers will not want to become like them.

Literature conveys more than a subjective, transitory or relative conception of reality. It seeks to grasp and express *higher* truth. Such truth transcends historical particularities and expresses *universal* truth. It also seeks to identify and rank various truths, with the intention of discovering and acknowledging the *highest* truth.

Good literature needs to have another important quality. This other quality is *realism*. It is by being realistic that writers gain the trust of their readers. Unrealistic stories seldom able attract and hold the attention of readers. Readers can sense that there is something wrong with, or missing from such a story or narrative.

Interest can be enhanced by the use of literary devices. These include dialogue, description, suspense, metaphors, similes, and allegories. There is a need to strike a balance in the use of literary devices, for example between description and dialogue. Too much or too little of either may make the story less interesting.

Stories can be told in the first person or the third person. They come in various genres that include stories about love, detective stories, science fiction, or historical novels. Plays come in the form of tragedies and comedies.

Good literature develops *empathy* in the reader, an awareness of and a concern for the “other.” The Qur’an emphasises concern for the “other” to a high degree. In line with the teaching of religion, good literature alerts the reader to the needs of other people, and in that sense helps make readers more compassionate towards their fellow human beings.

Reading literature also stimulates thinking, as readers have to come to grips with the choices faced by the characters in the books they read. In so far as it presents real life situations in credible ways, the wisdom conveyed by means of literature can help the reader to understand, and hopefully overcome various challenges facing him or her, social as well as personal.

The artist never produces art from nothing; he reflects on his experience and uses his talents to make sense out of the world around him. The imagination plays an important role in all art, including literature.

Art aims at perfection. A “masterpiece” is a work of art that is free of defects, internally consistent, and conveys a powerful message to the reader. It is aesthetically pleasing and ethically endowed at the same time. On account of its outstanding qualities, the masterpiece becomes what is known as a “classic,” a work that transcends the limitations and constraints of time and space.

Literature and religion

There is on-going debate about literature and the role it can play – if any – in the lives of Muslims. Narrow perceptions of Islam see a limited, if any role for literature (and art) in the world of the believer. Artistic representations tend to be identified with vain indulgence and thus discouraged.

Some view literature with apprehension, as undesirable and even harmful; literature may keep or divert people from important commitments. Others – including non-Muslims – perceive literature as “dangerous.” The danger stems from “corrupting” the morals of the people and thereby contributing to the disintegration of the community. Even the Qur’an directs the believers not to ‘follow’ the poets (26:224), for they often say what they do not do.

Poetry as such is not a guide to action. However, there may be some exceptions. Rumi’s Mathnawi, for instance, has often been described as Qur’an delivered in Pahlavi, an old Persian language.

Concerns about possible harmful effects of literature on readers are justified. They have been around for as long as literature. Many stories, novels and plays describe questionable liaisons and improper behaviour. Some works even appear to justify aberrant behaviour, by making it appear “normal.” Positive role models are often lacking. In so far as no element of worship is involved, however, representations of ordinary human beings are not incompatible with an Islamic outlook.

However, an excessively restrictive or puritanical attitude can stifle the development and growth of a civilisation. The human being needs sufficient space to express himself and to contribute to society each in his or her own unique way.

Storytelling in principle is not objectionable in Islam. This is confirmed by the fact that the Qur’an itself narrates many stories (*gasas*). It does this with an educational purpose in mind: to convey lessons in ethics. If writers of stories follow the Qur’anic model – and

seek not only to entertain but also to educate – then such literature would be acceptable in Islam, as it helps to realise the aims of Islam. Qur’anic messages often need to be delivered in lighter language for children, the youth, and those lacking familiarity with the Qur’an.

Thus, there is a positive role for literature in the development of the authentic Muslim personality. Indeed, the Qur’an itself exhorts the believers to “read.” The command to “read” was in fact the first verse revealed to the prophet of Islam, Muhammad, (pbuh) in the Qur’an.

Read: in the name of thy Lord who createth,
Createth man from a clot.
Read: And thy Lord is the Most Bounteous,
Who teacheth by the pen
Teacheth man that which he knew not. (Qur’an, 96: 1-5, translated
by Pickthall)

The word “Qur’an” is commonly translated as “Reading” or “Recital.” It is by “reading” the Qur’an that man attains knowledge of divine revelation and obtains guidance from his Creator. It is also by “reading” that man obtains other kinds of knowledge. Reading here is synonymous with “learning.” By reading literature, Muslims can understand the “other” better. Exposure to good literature can help build bridges of understanding between different civilisations and communities.

With knowledge of literature, Muslims will be in a better position to communicate more effectively with non-Muslims. They will also be able to establish and maintain peaceful relations with the non-Muslim world for the benefit of all. Good literature can help to bridge the divide between Muslims and the rest of the world. Such literature enables the reader to see things from other people’s perspectives, by “putting the reader in other people’s shoes.”

A discussion of literature can also serve as a basis for conducting inter-faith dialogue. Such a dialogue is now necessary more than ever if for no other reason than to avoid the touted and allegedly unavoidable “clash of civilisations.” Lack of knowledge about the “other” often breeds fear and distrust. Suitable literature can help overcome distrust and build bridges between civilisations. For Muslims, literature presents an opportunity to explain Islam to the world in a non-coercive way, and to encourage non-Muslims to find out more about Islam.

It is best to focus on books that have emerged by the test of time as “classics.” Classics can be found in every great civilisation. The reason some books attain the status of “classics” is that they articulate the essential human condition in ways that people from different ethnic backgrounds and cultures can easily relate to. It hardly needs to be emphasised that most of the great classics have drawn inspiration from religion in one way or another. Thus, good literature points beyond itself. It points to a *higher*, indeed the *highest* truth, the light sent by God to man by way of *revelation*.

The further development of Islamic literature can help counter the tendencies among some Muslims to incline to narrow and rigid views of Islam. Literature can be enlisted to serve the cause of Islam. It offers opportunities to present Islam and Muslims in a positive light. Literature can have a beneficial effect on its readers, educating them and making them more sensitive to the need to get along peacefully with others.

The reading and writing of literature can contribute to the building or renewal of a civilisation. Reading can be compared to “traveling through the earth and seeing what was the end of those without faith.” This “travel” takes place by means of the imagination, merely at the cost of a book. Reading can help one to understand other people better.

Finally, the study of literature should be accompanied by an *evaluation* of literature, known as *literary criticism*. In the case of Islamic criticism, the reader is taught to read and comment on literature from the *Islamic perspective*, from within the “Islamic worldview.” In this way, any weaknesses of a work of literature can be identified and analysed. Similarly, its merits can likewise be highlighted, where and when appropriate, and discussed in a suitable manner.

There is no prohibition against the telling of stories in the Qur’an. The Shariah upholds the principle of original permissibility (*ibahah*): everything is permitted unless it is prohibited by a clear text. There is nothing wrong with telling a story, especially if the intention of the storyteller is to educate the reader.

Good literature should illustrate the triumph of good over evil. The writer is the conscience of his or her community. He or she records acts of goodness as well as wickedness, while praising the former and condemning the latter. In this way, the writer participates in “commanding what is good and prohibiting what is evil.”