**Literature for a Changing World: Effective Literature Studies in an American Islamic High School**

**Session ID #Cu2**

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**ISNA ED FORUM PROPOSAL**

**Title**: Literature for a Changing World: Effective Literature Studies in an American Islamic High School

**Track**: Curriculum and Instruction

**Promotional line:**

Please join our discussion on a topic that challenges all Islamic high schools: the selection of literature. Learn how we balance the promotion of an Islamic worldview with the conflicting views found in contemporary and classic literature, film, and arts. Be a part of the discussion to improve the ways and means we use to teach Literature, to prepare our students for the world!

**Guiding Questions:**  How do we prepare our students for the AP Lit exam selections that often contradict our values? How can we train our students for a world in which Islamophobia is a background theme in so much of classic as well as contemporary fiction and non-fiction literature, film, arts? How can students understand that literature can be viewed from the perspective of a Muslim who rejects certain value systems and lifestyles yet understands the complexities involved?

**Abstract**: What purpose does high school literature curriculum serve? In our school, we promote an Islamic worldview and have deeper discussions in order to approach complex societal problems. In our presentation, learn how we address classic literary works which include Islamophobic themes as well as non-Islamic worldviews.

Then join us in a discussion with educators on the deeper and sensitive implications of literature in an American Islamic high school.

**Audience**: High School (grades 9-12) teachers, administrators, and board members

**Biographies**: Jelena Naim was born and raised in Chicago where she attended the University of Illinois, pursuing a bachelor's degree in French and a master's in Teaching English as a Second Language. Jelena has over 20 years of experience as an educator and administrator in public, private, and charter schools. Jelena currently serves as principal at Al Falah Academy in Metro Atlanta.

Safia Arif teaches High School (9-12) Literature & Composition at Al Falah Academy; she holds a B.A. in English Education and an M.A. in Teaching English from Georgia State University. Additionally, Safia is a certified AP Literature course instructor.

**Summary:**

This presentation will open with a brief introduction discussing the challenges we face in the American Islamic high school in regard to literature and texts. As prescribed through College Board’s AP Literature course, canonical texts will be discussed throughout our presentation so that we can effectively address many texts that we find problematic in an Islamic environment. We will share and discuss guidelines that administrators can create in order to more effectively choose which novels are taught in the High School English department, as we have done so in our school. In order to make sense of our guidelines, audience members will see our guidelines in action in the form of two tried and true lessons plans. We will walk through an effective lesson that discusses *Moby Dick* and the problematic Islamophobic themes through the character of Queequeg. Additionally, we will share an effective lesson plan used alongside the reading of *The Great Gatsby*, so that we can tackle themes that do not reflect Islamic values but must be analyzed in the context of contemporary literature. Finally, we would like to create an open forum for educators and administrators to openly discuss novels and texts, so that each attendee can leave with their very own internal novel list to take to their communities and classrooms.

**ISNA ED FORUM FINAL PAPER**

**Introduction (Jelena Naim, Islamic school Principal)**

Our presentation explores the wide-open possibilities regarding how to teach Literature at the high school level in the context of an independent Islamic school. Our curricular scope in the private school context is completely up to us, much more so than the scope of math, science, or even social studies classes. Technical classes must align closely in curriculum to public school expectations—we can’t be too imaginative when the name of the course is Calculus 1. In Social Studies/History, whether it is World Geography or US History, the title defines the scope, even if as an Islamic school, we inject priorities, like a larger focus on Asia in the Geo class, or we provide depth of coverage of themes like ‘Muslims in America’ in a US History class.

However, in the high school Literature class, we are most fortunate to be able to provide an Islamic worldview, even when the literary era, genre, or theme is a conventional one that may also be addressed in secular/public schools. What does this mean? How have we in the Islamic school sector taken advantage of this broader scope for the benefit of our Muslim students?

At this point, it must be emphasized that we are discussing high school, not middle school, literature. In American high schools, this involves texts that are considered to express adult themes and levels of interpretive challenge. We don’t mean “adult themes” in the X-rated sense, but adult themes in depth, complexity, involvement of human emotions, and in scenarios that involve adult characters. A basic contrast is that middle school literature typically involves middle-to-high-school-aged protagonists; adult novels involve adults primarily.

Our goal with this presentation is to affirm the positive role that the high school literature class can have in an Islamic high school, with a scope that has the potential of shaping our youth into well-informed, articulate, analytical, aware, and even savvy consumers of literature and media in the setting of a liberal democracy in which free speech is a major foundational value. The Islamic high school lit class has the power of revealing hidden agendas and stereotypes that a secular/public high school class often overlooks, thus empowering our Muslim students to understand how to respond. We must take advantage of this opportunity in the same way we take advantage of an Islamic high school to offer Qur’an and Islamic Studies classes.

**Introduction (Safia Arif, HS Lit Teacher)**

Teaching literature in high school can be quite challenging. Fitting grammar, writing, vocabulary, and MLA format into 50 minute lessons is only half of the battle. Teaching literature is a completely different arena, and it is one that I enjoy teaching the most.

I’ve always praised Allah (subhana wata ‘ala) for where I am, and where I teach. I have the ability and freedom to teach, learn from, and discuss literature as necessary. First, I get to choose what I want to read and every day, I get to cater my lesson to a small group of bright eyed young American Muslims. I get to read texts that are ignored in the public school curriculum; I get to open eyes to readings from multicultural authors with whom the students identify, and I have the blessing to help weld these young minds into socially conscious young adults.

During our “policy and procedures” week in the beginning of the school year, I not only like to discuss my grading system, but I also ask the students to understand and reflect on what to expect throughout the school year. It turns into my own miniature diversity training. I make sure the students recognize that they must approach literature with maturity and an open mind. I stress that they must understand that literature is canonical and it is prescribed to us from history and those who control what we read. I help them understand why we are different and unique, but there are many authors like us in this great nation.

In my first official year of teaching high school English Literature & Composition, I have consistently found myself trying to explain to my students how and why there isn’t diversity in the canon, and why popular ethnically Muslim authors don’t claim to be Muslim anymore. Additionally, I have been shocked, ashamed, and humiliated by canonical literature and the ways in which it is taught. Malcolm X is still taught to have been a violent aggressor, Othello is still a Moorish brute, and Afghanistan is still a land of Muslims who rape and stone adulterers.

Before we begin reading *The Kite Runner*, I tell the students how most people they meet in college will have read the same book, and that they may not understand that all Muslim countries are not like that. I share with the students my experience in the AP Summer Institute, where I found 50 future AP teachers taught how to depict Othello as an immigrant Christian convert. I help them understand themselves and their own identity though Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*. I must pull scholarly peer reviewed journal articles that discuss *Moby Dick* so they better understand why Herman Melville thinks Muslims celebrate Ramadan by doing headstands. I constantly have to apologize for literature, authors, and the canon, but I can only help them better understand the world though my classroom and the world that exists though the power of literature. I teach 30 American Muslims who must be well-read and able to discuss literature now and in their futures.

I plan to discuss these issues and more, along with 2 fully produced lesson plans that effectively teach and discuss Islamophobic themes in *Moby Dick* and *The Great Gatsby*.

I hope this presentation jump-starts an effort by Islamic high schools across the US and Canada to share novel choices, instructional techniques, and strategies to strengthen our Muslim high school students more as they develop into adulthood, make choices regarding their career and peer group, and express themselves through an Islamic lifestyle that is compatible with a productive engagement in American society.

**Presentation (Jelena Naim, Islamic school Principal)**

STANCE

We stand for:

* An Islamic approach and worldview
* Deeper understanding of current events, not only a focus on history/the past
* A positive view of parents, family values, and the character trait of Respect
* Acceptance of diversity and free speech
* Rigorous texts (we identify AP-level texts to challenge our students)

We consciously avoid a heavy focus on:

* Violence
* Drug abuse
* Sexual explicitness with graphic content
* Dystopia, with its characteristic despair and negativity

However, in reviewing the list of novels written in the 20th and 21st centuries, the list becomes rather short if the avoided themes are removed. We wondered why that is.

To start up a list of novels to be assigned at each grade level, we start by researching the literary canon, or texts considered “the best ever thought and said”, which includes the great authors recognized by most, like Shakespeare, Hemingway, etc. There is no one Literary Canon, just suggestions from different groups or people. A school or teacher may see if a particular organization that creates a list is aligned with their philosophy, and that is how lists are adopted into curriculum. More often, teachers have independence in selecting novels they are familiar with, and teacher forums share and popularize those selections.

One resource includes the Advanced Placement literature exam; in our bibliography, we offer a list of the novels that were mentioned in AP exams throughout past years. There are several novels that reccur often, and schools often try to prepare students better by assigning those full novels as texts so that students are most familiar with the themes and literary elements found in those novels.

Another consideration for creating a novel list must take into account the purpose of literature study. We use great literature to learn about different cultures, times, and peoples, in order to prevent a self-centered focus only on our own age group, century, or place. We explore critical themes that permit us to define ourselves and understand context, such as God, identity, culture, and society. Literature allows us to wear the shoes of a person in a totally different life situation, and see the world through their eyes, thus gaining their experience to broaden our own. In studying literature centered on the experience of persons different from ourselves, we gain awareness of the unseen discriminatory constructs that cloud our own thinking without even realizing it. Literature forces us to face subtle messages and attitudes, and gives us new experiences vicariously, thus expanding our horizons and critical thinking. Rather than shunning difficult themes, in an Islamic school it is important to guide students to view literary themes through an Islamic lens. They will be exposed to discomforting ideas in college, career, and life, and the more we can be there to guide students on how to think, the more likelihood that such experiences will be handled in the best way from our point of view.

It is important here to note that the study of literature, on a mass scale in which all young people in almost all cultures are exposed to as part of a standard education, is a very recent phenomenon. Only in the past 150 years or so have people outside of elite classes and limited cultures studied literature. The ability to read, and even less to read novels, was a rare gift, and education from the Prophetic times to the mid-to-late19th century was mostly devoid of literature studies. So the development of mass access to novels and the analysis of literary themes has come up only very recently in human history. As a contemporary field, themes prevalent in an age when the existence of God is questioned, and alternative philosophies and worldviews are explored very openly, abound.

In this environment, Islamic schools are posed with a dilemma. Should faith-based schools read only the traditional “classics”, pre-20th century, because difficult themes are not posed in the graphic language of contemporary times? Should Muslim students read only or primarily Muslim/Islamic authors? Should a rigorous academic program in an Islamic school focus on the Advanced Placement list of novels to give Muslim students a strong foundation for the AP test? Islamic schools need to have this discussion, especially at the high school level where adult-themed novels are commonly taught, in order to gradually develop our “internal canon”. Islamic schools must be explicit about novel guidelines and policies so that teachers, parents, and students are aware of the criteria that guides the selection of books.

Our stance is that educators in Islamic schools gain strategies on how to include difficult themes while also promoting an Islamic worldview, We have identified two types of texts that we propose should explicitly be taught in Islamic schools, with the guidance of a qualified literature teacher who aligns with the school’s Islamic vision and mission, Such texts, in small doses, present to high school students an opportunity to discuss, in a safe space grounded in Islamic values, some of the themes prevalent in novels of the 20th and 21st centuries. The guiding questions prepared in advance in the lesson plans of the teacher offer an opportunity to lead students to identify the worldview of the author, any bias inherent in portrayals of characters, any emphasis on negative features of Islam or of a religious viewpoint, or the consequences of unIslamic behavior, morals, or values.

With the prerequisite conditions mentioned above in place, namely:

* Qualified literature teachers,
* Aligned with the mission and vision of the Islamic school,
* Balanced between past and contemporary themes,
* With explicit awareness of and planning for the exposition of difficult themes, to help guide, students in addressing such themes and maintaining a strong Muslim identity,

we feel that censoring novels to “protect” our high-school-age youth from unpleasant discussions does a disservice to them by preventing the development of needed critical thinking skills that could counter their own and other students’ exposure to negative portrayals of Muslims and Islam in college classes and beyond.

One category of texts that could be found in some vaunted lists of recommended novels for high school students includes novels with Islamophobic themes or a bias against religion or belief in God. Such novels include bias against Muslims and Islam, a running characterization of the Muslim as a negative force, or a general mockery of belief and believers. Some common examples of such texts from a variety of time periods include *The Divine Comedy*, by Dante Alighieri, *Othello*, by William Shakespeare, *Moby Dick*, by Herman Melville, and *Not Without My Daughter,* by Betty Mahmoody.

Another category more often included in contemporary literature are novels that include portrayals of an unIslamic worldview, with characters engaging in illegal or immoral behavior, a lack of parameters around love and relationships, and a glorification of independent identity over family values. Examples include *Twelfth Night*, by William Shakespeare, *The Great Gatsby*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Siddhartha*, by Hermann Hesse, *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison, and *Kite Runner*, by Khaled Hosseini.

**Presentation (Safia Arif, HS Lit Teacher)**

In my time teaching these young minds, I have naturally developed practical methods and ways to teach these texts. They reflect the Common Core standards, AP Expectations, and more. In reading texts with Islamophobic themes, the following is a great way for students to understand the literature’s complexity:

* Point out and quote problematic passages from the text

“Meanwhile, he continued the business of undressing, and at last showed his chest and arms. As I live, these covered parts of him were checkered with the same squares as his face; his back, too, was all over the same dark squares; he seemed to have been in a Thirty Years’ War, and just escaped from it with a sticking-plaster shirt. Still more, his very legs were marked, as if a parcel of dark green frogs were running up the trunks of young palms. It was now quite plain that he must be some abominable savage or other shipped aboard of a whaleman in the South Seas, and so landed in this Christian country. I quaked to think of it. A peddler of heads too—perhaps the heads of his own brothers. He might take a fancy to mine—heavens! look at that tomahawk! But there was no time for shuddering, for now the savage went about something that completely fascinated my attention, and convinced me that he must indeed be a heathen. Going to his heavy grego, or wrapall, or dreadnaught, which he had previously hung on a chair, he fumbled in the pockets, and produced at length a curious little deformed image with a hunch on its back, and exactly the colour of a three days’ old Congo baby. Remembering the embalmed head, at first I almost thought that this black manikin was a real baby preserved in some similar manner. But seeing that it was not at all limber, and that it glistened a good deal like polished ebony, I concluded that it must be nothing but a wooden idol, which indeed it proved to be. For now the savage goes up to the empty fire-place, and removing the papered fire-board, sets up this little hunch-backed image, like a tenpin, between the andirons. The chimney jambs and all the bricks inside were very sooty, so that I thought this fire-place made a very appropriate little shrine or chapel for his Congo idol” (Melville 59-60)

* Use academic journals and research for outside reading (or reflect on why there is no research on the subject)
* Encourage students to think critically & critique the literature
* Pull in parallel characters and examples in history of similar phobias
* Students reflect in on author's purpose and reason for writing

This year, we were blessed with the opportunity to see Moby Dick live on stage after reading the novel. At the end of the play, during the Q&A, the students asked the most difficult question in the audience that day. They wanted to know how the actor playing Queequeg felt about playing a character that perpetuated racist agendas. The actor had no answer.

While it’s easy to discount Islamophobia in American literature, it’s more difficult for students to understand non-Islamic worldviews and how they should approach them.

So much of American literature praises themes in which Islam does not agree. Drinking and eating excessively translate into characters having fun. Lavish parties and the throwing away of money even turns into themes for Birthday parties in Non-Muslim culture. Gambling, adultery, drug use, and music are normal things that happen to adult characters in literature. How can we ensure our Muslim teens understand an Islamic approach to these topics?

* Expose characters for their moral flaws and the character's progression to finding peace
* Bring in scholar or counselor to address issues that are outside teacher's expertise
* Relate contemporary issues to examples in the Sunnah
* Help students understand while some behaviors are praised, we know better

A colleague of mine in the public school system once asked me how I made the students understand that cursing isn’t okay, even though it appears in literature sometimes. It had never crossed my mind due to the fact that I have consistently found myself battling more than just the curse words.

I’m grateful to have these complex issues come up in the classroom and through literature, where we can understand the world around us with the support of and Islamic school and environment. We have the ability to teach students more than just literature.

**Discussion (both presenters):**

From our research and informal survey of Islamic high schools and the IECN listserve, we have the impression that our questions have only recently been posed in this manner, in which we seek to establish prerequisites, norms, and stances towards the study of literature at the high school level. This is an important element of education, and without guidelines, we risk exposing students to ideas without support and sending them to college unprepared to handle debate and controversy directed toward their very identity.

1. What are some novels that portray Islamophobic themes, yet they are contemporary and highly regarded?
2. Which novels display a non-Islamic worldview, yet also offer a rich literary experience?
3. Which novels can implement these instructional techniques as described in the sample lessons so that they open up curricular choices to students?
4. Which novels allow students to analyze contemporary themes and be well-versed in AP texts?
5. Which novels should we teach with these guidelines in mind? How can students read literature and maintain their Islamic identity with a positive worldview?

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