

ROUNDTABLE

Lost in Paradise: On the “Coloniality” of English Literary Studies in Iran

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It is said that Mirza Ja‘far, one of the first Iranian students to study in England, was an admirer of the poet John Milton, author of *Paradise Lost*, a classic of English literature. On a tour of Cambridge shortly after his arrival in 1815, Mirza visited Christ’s College, Milton’s alma mater, and took as a memento some leaves from a mulberry tree that was planted in 1608, the year the great poet was born.

Historian Nile Green speculates that Mirza Ja‘far could at that moment have been whispering the lines from book 10 of *Paradise Lost*, in which Milton alludes to the northern Iranian cities of “Casbeen” (Qazvin) and “Tauris” (Tabriz) as sanctuaries from a “Russian Foe,” namely Ivan the Terrible, who overran his Tartar neighbours in 1556.¹ Green makes this assumption because Iran was at the time of Mirza Ja‘far’s journey in the midst of a colonial war with Russia, not to mention that the sound of “Tauris,” Mirza’s hometown of Tabriz, must have been music to his ears. In fact, Green argues that the journey of the first group of Iranian students to England was a dialogic encounter between two nations in which the students sought not only the new sciences of Europe but also brought their unique perspectives into the public sphere of Regency Britain, providing, with their travels and travelogues, “an alternative history of England.”²

My contention in this roundtable is that unlike Mirza Ja‘far’s creative reading of Milton in the 1810s, the academic institution of English literature in contemporary Iran is an intellectually colonized project. If in the early stages of their encounters with modernity some Iranian thinkers treated English as a medium of reflection upon the self and its worldliness, the academic institution of English literature as a “secular” branch of the liberal arts in postrevolutionary Iran is in a crisis of *late* modernity: a postcolonial condition that is ironically Eurocentric despite the anticolonial ideology of the state, oblivious to the presence of Anglo-American cultures of imperialism in Iran since at least the dawn of colonialism.³ It is my concern that the inability of Iran-based departments of English literature to make any original contribution to literary scholarship around the world will have dire implications for the state of the humanities in light of the geopolitical and environmental challenges that we face in Iran and the broader region.

A Post/Colonial Crisis

In Iran, during the second half of the 20th century, two historical watersheds formed the foundations of the humanities in general, and of English literary studies in particular: the Cold War during the Pahlavi era and the cultural revolution following the Islamic Revolution.⁴

¹Nile Green, *The Love of Strangers: What Six Muslim Students Learned in Jane Austen’s London* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 189; “As when the Tartar from his Russian Foe / By Astracan over the Snowie Plaines / Retires, or Bactrian Sophi from the horns / Of Turkish Crescent, leaves all waste beyond / The Realm of Aladule, in his retreat. / To Tauris or Casbeen” from John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 2007.

²Green, *Love of Strangers*, 20.

³For an insightful critique of the circulation of American cultural products in the Middle East and North Africa, see Brian T. Edwards, *After the American Century: The Ends of U.S. Culture in the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

⁴Researching the institutional history of the humanities in Iran faces the hardship of accessing government archives, not to mention the relative lack of previous research interest. In the following, I am indebted to recent scholarship by Esmail Zeiny and Shirin Teifouri.

The institutional roots of the “English department” in Iran can be traced to the liberal anti-communist consensus according to which the United States pledged to help Iran, a developing ally strategically to the south of the USSR, to modernize its education system in line with President Truman’s Point IV Program.⁵ The hallmark of this investment was the foundation in 1962 of Pahlavi University in collaboration with the University of Pennsylvania. The liberal vision of the white Anglo-American Adam in pursuit of individual freedom, manifest in such hyper-canonical authors as Shakespeare and Melville, is still manifest in the English literature section of the central library of Pahlavi University, renamed Shiraz University in 1979. To this day, the elitist emphasis on the Euro-American canon and on New Criticism methodology (itself a result of the collective effort in the postwar United States to conceal the contradictions inherent in Western civilization) inform the way English literature is taught and studied in Iran.⁶

The cultural revolution (1980–82) with its goal of Islamization of the Iranian higher education system in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution did seek—but certainly failed—to dismantle the entrenched Eurocentrism of the English department. Surely, in an effort to combat the “Westoxification” of the discipline, the so-called immoral material such as the fiction of D. H. Lawrence was removed from the new textbooks.⁷ Yet cultural imperialism in the form of an exclusive focus on the literature of the British Isles was left intact. Furthermore, the New Criticism, which was promoted in the 1960s as a hallmark of American methodology, continued apace, this time as a ruse to “strip students of the ability to develop critical positions of their own and imprison them in a non-realistic and timeless relation to the world.”⁸ The outcome has been a post/colonial crisis of “academic dependency,” a “banking” model of pedagogy, and “stasis of methodology” that persists to this day.⁹

The initial idea for this essay emerged when I returned to Iran after completing my postgraduate studies abroad. Arriving at Shiraz University following site-specific research experiences in postcolonial Malaysia and multicultural Britain, I was determined to extend my research and pedagogy in more meaningful ways: to read Anglophone literatures from my uniquely peripheral perspective and to produce and promote knowledge as a non-European participant in English literary studies. What I soon realized, however, was that, despite the establishment of a postcolonial state after the Islamic Revolution, our English departments have remained out of touch with more recent developments in the discipline, resisting the tides of change from the comparative and transnational turn to the postcolonial broadening of the canon to include the World Englishes and address the advent of multiculturalism and globalization in literary studies. In one particular survey course, our English majors were required to memorize verses in Old English without learning the Germanic language and orally recite the poems as part of their final examinations. There is nothing wrong with an immersive learning experience, but an utter disregard for historical context during teaching and an aversion to critical insight upon examination are symptoms of a colonial education taken for granted in postrevolutionary times.

Viewing this postcolonial crisis in the broader context of Iranian modernity exposes an irony: classics of English literature have been present in Iran since at least the 19th century, when local intelligentsia, negotiating their “Iranianness” through Western eyes, read and interpreted English and other Euro-American classics as gems of world literature. The approach of many such early-modern intellectuals was creative and even critical. One interesting example is Mirza Habib Esfahani, a political dissident exiled in Istanbul, who in 1906 published a translation of James Morier’s oriental novel, *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* (1824). What is definitive to this appropriation of the English text is Esfahani’s

⁵Esmail Zeiny, “Academic Imperialism: Towards Decolonisation of English Literature in Iranian Universities,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 47 (2019): 94.

⁶See Theo D’haen, *The Routledge Concise History of World Literature* (London: Routledge, 2012), 64–65. The rise of New Criticism can in part be attributed to the arrival of weary intellectuals in the US after WWII, who now preferred the study of “the laws of the human soul” to the study of international relations.

⁷Shirin Teifouri, “English Literature and Discursive Changes in Iran after the Islamic Revolution (1979),” in *International Perspectives on the Teaching of Literature in Schools: Global Principles and Practices*, ed. Andrew Goodwyn, Cal Durrant, Louan Reid, and Lisa Scherff (London: Routledge, 2018), 165.

⁸Ibid., 168.

⁹Zeiny, “Academic Imperialism,” 88 (argument following Syed Hussein Alatas); and Teifouri, “English Literature,” 167, 172 (argument following Paulo Freire).

free translation of an original “colonialist–orientalist” novel into an “anti-colonialist revolutionary” narrative, at a time when the Iranian readership was at the dawn of the Constitutional Revolution (1905–11).¹⁰ Mirza Habib is widely applauded for his timely “reworking of Persian prose from the previous courtly and highly ornamented style into a written vernacular, a common and widely understandable prose” for the emerging middle classes who would be demanding justice and reform in the decades to come.¹¹

In contrast, the institution of English literature as an academic discipline that occurred during the Cold War to consolidate the aesthetic dominance of global English in between the Soviet Union and the oil reserves of the Persian Gulf has proved a far more problematic project. Take Azar Nafisi’s memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), for example, which can be read as a vivid account of the state of English literary studies in postrevolutionary Iran. In four parts, each named after a canonical author of Anglo-American literature from Nabokov to Austen, a professor of literature and her students read the classics to, on the bright side, address their predicaments as Iranian women in the face of gender discrimination.¹² Yet they do so without accounting for the processes of canon formation through which the texts under their scrutiny came to embody universal ideals of liberty or acquired cultural hegemony in non-European contexts.

Against this backdrop, English departments in Iran have lost the capacity to produce knowledge that is compatible or competitive with their counterparts in the English-speaking and the postcolonial world. Proponents of the discipline either pay lip service to the classics without minding the historical underpinnings of canon formation or study the texts using vogue postmodern critiques outside their respective contexts, in mere abstraction. Noncanonical texts are rarely examined, interdisciplinary methods are largely neglected, and the scholar mechanically and religiously “applies” (a code name for “imposing”) Western theory without allowing the text to speak its internal complexities. Thus, as Hamid Dabashi aptly points out, the institutional practice of reading *Lolita* in Tehran, or elsewhere in Iran, boils down to a “contemporary case of positing English literature as a means of manufacturing trans-regional consent to Euro-American domination.”¹³

Although one might suggest, as Shirin Teifouri does, that the current stalemate of the discipline is due to postrevolutionary circumstances, from international isolation to nativist policies in higher education, I believe that English departments in Iran harbor a Eurocentric sense of provincialism and reactionary secularism in retaliation for the postcolonial ideology of the state.¹⁴ Due to this passive-aggressive binary thinking—namely that there is only an “Islamist” or a “Western” mode of thought and that the “enlightened” intellectual must but choose the latter—literary scholars prove incapable of accommodating their pedagogy and research to local and regional realities in a world of increasing global interdependencies. It is indeed ironic that the few existing studies that have thoroughly explored the colonial circulation of English in 19th-century Iran or the emergence of American cultural imperialism during the Cold War have been undertaken not in an Iran-based branch of the humanities but from the vantage point of area studies done mostly in the United States.¹⁵

One case that demonstrates the institutional negligence of noncanonical texts in research and curricular practices is James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* (1963) at the central library of Shiraz University. When I checked out this book in 2017 to research an upcoming course in literary prose, I realized that Baldwin’s volume of essays had not been borrowed from our library for the past forty-two years, not since 1975—some four years before the Islamic Revolution (see Fig. 1). It might sound far-fetched to correspond the check-out history of a single book to a nation’s history of a revolution and its

¹⁰Kamran Rastegar, “The Unintended Gift: The Adventures of Hajji Baba Ispahani as a Transactional Text between English and Persian Literatures,” *Middle Eastern Literatures* 10, no. 3 (2007): 252.

¹¹Ibid., 253.

¹²Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (New York: Random House, 2003).

¹³Hamid Dabashi, *Brown Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), 71.

¹⁴Teifouri, “English Literature,” 172.

¹⁵See Green, *Love of Strangers*, and Edwards, *After the American Century*, as exemplary cases of literary and cultural studies from the Iranian and West Asian perspectives. One of my colleagues has acquired a copy of *The Love of Strangers: What Six Muslim Students Learned in Jane Austen’s London* on the campus of a university in Tehran, from a pile of books that were allegedly left in the open, waiting to be disposed from the library!

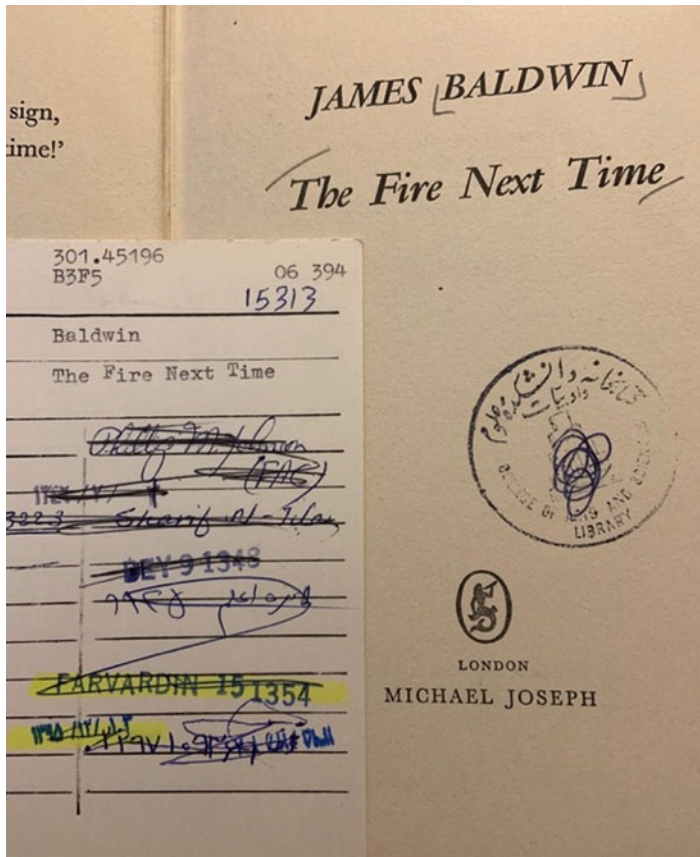


Figure 1. Checkout sheet of *The Fire Next Time*, indicating December 1969 and April 1975 as the last checkout dates prior to March 2017. Photograph by the author.

aftermath. Yet if we are to take *The Fire Next Time*, one of the literary hallmarks of the civil rights movement, as a call for action at a time of revolt in US history, then the marginality of Baldwin's work in post/revolutionary Iran is ironic. After all, the aim of the cultural revolution of the 1980s was to decolonize the humanities from the neo-imperialist curricula of the past. The absence of a mandatory course in African American literature to assign the likes of Baldwin in the postrevolutionary classroom goes against the grain of a state-sponsored pursuit of global justice and frequent expressions of solidarity with victims of racial inequality in the United States.¹⁶

Decoloniality as Paradigm Shift

I would finally propose the way forward as a refashioning of English literary studies that is not simply postcolonial, but that will effectively decolonize the field from intellectually compromising attitudes. With regard to this paradigm shift, I maintain, in conversation with Walter D. Mignolo, that there is a crucial difference between the condition of *postcolonialism* (which has not been emancipatory in

¹⁶Early in the hostage crisis at the US Embassy in Tehran (1979–81), Ayatollah Khomeini ordered the immediate release of African American hostages because of their state of oppression in the US. Soon after the revolution, the Iranian government issued a postage stamp featuring Malcolm X as an expression of state solidarity. In February 2017 the current supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, also commemorated Malcolm X on the anniversary of the black Muslim leader's assassination, calling him a martyr. See Minoo Southgate, "The Negative Images of Blacks in Some Medieval Iranian Writings," *Iranian Studies* 17, no. 1 (1984): 3; Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (London: Penguin, 2011), 486; and "The Music Video of Malcolm X," Khamenei.ir, accessed 12 October 2019, http://farsi.khamenei.ir/ndata/news/35763/13951204_10301.flv.

Iran) and the more radical alternative of *decoloniality* as a thorough “delinking” of the intellect and imagination from “the colonial matrix of power.”¹⁷

Building on Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o’s manifesto “On the Abolition of the English Department,” Esmaeil Zeiny has recently called for a decolonization of the discipline in Iran by way of broadening the canon, deploying anti-imperialist methodologies, replacing Anglo-American with Anglophone literatures, and above all the inclusion of Iranian literature in English translation into the curricula.¹⁸ I embrace Zeiny’s suggestions because the theoretical turn of the 1970s and the subsequent integration of postcolonialism into literary studies were never formally institutionalized in our English departments.¹⁹ However, I believe that in the site-specific case of contemporary Iran, it is important not to conflate postcolonialism with decoloniality, for if the former led to the foundation of a modern nation–state existentially defined in relation to—and currently in opposition to—“the West,” the latter was seldom theorized as an alternative path to a new sense of worldliness.²⁰

The postcolonial vision of Zeiny (and Wa Thiong’o) of founding a “Department of Literature” in lieu of the “English Department” and recentralizing the national culture in the process runs the risk of replacing the existing primacy of English literature with a future hegemony of Iranian literature in translation, perhaps at the expense of other marginal languages that have existed, or crossed paths, with both Persian and English across the region. Whether in imperialist or postcolonial discourse, the logic of “coloniality” has been embedded in “the totalizing claims and political-epistemic violence of modernity.”²¹ Thus, the ultimate refashioning of literary studies in Iran cannot materialize without de-linking its agenda from either its current state of Anglophilic isolation or a future state of merely negotiating the integration of Iranian literature in translation into the canon of World Englishes. In other words, English literary studies cannot be decolonized until proponents of the discipline shed their hubris and view English as only one among a plethora of competing world languages that happens—at a transient moment in world history—to possess global cultural hegemony. “The task of *decolonial* thinkers,” Mignolo asserts, “is not to claim recognition or to be included, but to shift from the one to the many, from a universal option to pluriversal options.”²²

This is neither to promote a recourse to nativism nor to imagine a utopia of decentered harmony where there is no difference between English and Persian in terms of cultural capital. Rather, we need literary scholars who (as a mentor once taught me) are neither proud nor ashamed of writing in English as a lingua franca and instead seek to unearth the paths in which the circulation of English as a language and global culture, in addition to Persian and other local languages and cultures, have shaped their lived experiences in contemporary Iran. Rather than taking parochial pride in their English education or opposing it in a way that only legitimizes the global hegemony of the language, a new Department of Literature would accommodate self-reflecting scholars and students who are aware of their strengths and biases as raced and gendered citizens, who articulate their hopes as a body politic, and who theorize their fears as inhabitants of West Asia in the face of the geopolitical challenges in the region as well as the climate crisis globally—to name but a few potential pathways.

I finally conceive such comparative and intersectional *self-reflection* as a mode of engagement following Mignolo’s paradigm shift “from an ontology of essence to a relational ontology,” definitive

¹⁷Walter D. Mignolo, “On Comparison: Who Is Comparing What and Why?” in *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*, ed. Rita Felski and Susan Friedman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 103.

¹⁸Zeiny, “Academic Imperialism,” 101–3. See also Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o, “On the Abolition of the English Department,” in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), 438–42.

¹⁹One significant exception, which remains an isolated example, is the faculty of world studies at the University of Tehran. For an interesting overview, see Brian T. Edwards, “American Studies in Tehran,” *Public Culture* 19, no. 3 (2007).

²⁰See Hamid Dabashi, *Post-Orientalism: Knowledge and Power in Time of Terror* (London: Transaction, 2008), 175. Considering the political upheavals of late 20th-century Iran, Dabashi finds it problematic that “when the subaltern speaks” through such ideological mediums as third-world socialism, anti-colonial nationalism, and above all militant Islamism, the post-colonial subject has ended up speaking “the language of its oppressors,” replicating “the colonially fabricated binary between ‘Islam and the West.’”

²¹Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 1.

²²Mignolo, “On Comparison,” 106. Emphasis is mine.

to decoloniality.²³ To be concrete, I have so far argued that English literary studies, as practiced in contemporary postrevolutionary Iran, have naively assumed the empirical position of a “detached observer” (Mignolo’s words) who commits to study the literary phenomena only to reify the already-given primacy of English as a global language and essentializes his or her own subject position as an orientalized consumer of cultural imperialism. Such captive imagination has already been exposed from the vantage point of critical theory.²⁴ What Mignolo’s “relational ontology” brings to the table is a call for self-reflection to re-historicize not only the object of study (in our case, the Anglophone cultural event) but also the agent of scholarship (a literary scholar, based in Iran, of a certain religion, social class, ethnic or linguistic background, gender, and sexual orientation) whose historical exigencies relate to, and thus inform, theory and praxis. “Decolonial thinking,” Mignolo declares, brings about a twofold layer of analysis “in which the *knowing* subject and the *known* object or processes are configured at the crossroads of racial and geohistorical colonial frames.”²⁵

The silver lining here is that a significant minority of our students already incline toward “relationality” in their treatments of Anglo-American cultures, appropriating the texts they consume based on their own desires and interests despite the texts’ original logic of circulation.²⁶ In a previous study, we documented this attitude within the English department in the process of researching the ways our students conceive their worldliness and self-image as global citizens, given their state of international isolation in postrevolutionary Iran. The result was that, despite the entrenched Eurocentrism of at least our English department, the group of students whom we interviewed approached the texts they study and the cultural products they encounter as a means of self-reflection and of imagining “conceptual spaces of activism”: to view the other and relate the other’s existence to that of their own.²⁷ Like their precursor Mirza Ja’far’s creative reading of *Paradise Lost* under Milton’s mulberry tree, some students have regained the ability to read English not as an imperial language to revere or despise but as a window into the world; to read the plight of others abroad and discover the sites of violence and solidarity at home; to read Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* on the African American struggles for racial justice and seek out ways of opposing racism and xenophobia in Iran and across the region.

Ultimately, the decolonization of the English department is a collaborative effort in which curious students and interested teachers, within the framework of a new humanities, search for relational ways of reading Anglophone literatures—and take the road less traveled.

²³Ibid., 112–13.

²⁴See prior discussion of Wa Thiong’o, Zeiny, and Teifouri.

²⁵Mignolo, “On Comparison,” 113. Emphasis is mine.

²⁶See *After the American Century*, in which Edwards argues that with the advent of the digital age consumers of American cultural products no longer embrace an imperial logic of circulation as was the case during the period of cultural Cold War.

²⁷Shirin Saeidi and Amirhossein Vafa, “After Isolation: Mirrors between Parallel Worlds and New Conceptual Spaces of Activism in Post-Revolutionary Iran,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 47, no. 3 (2019): 417–43.