

PROBLEMS OF MIDDLE EASTERN LITERATURE TAUGHT IN THE PHILIPPINES: A CRITICAL REFLECTION BY THE LOCAL ACADEMIA

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Abstract

This paper accounts academic discourses in selected Middle Eastern Literature, both as a critical discourse and a means for cultural education, with reflections on the Philippine socio-political and cultural conditions. Issues such as stereotypes, racism, and the postcolonial remains were central to the discourse. Drawing from accounted responses of literature students, it is seen that their encounter with Middle Eastern Literature is deeply informed by their personal and socio-cultural phenomena. This qualitative study was conducted using Purposive Critical Case Sampling. Informants of the study are World Literature students from Far Eastern University, with different academic programs, age, gender, religious, and cultural background. Both the multicultural approach to literature and Said's orientalism are vital in the shaping of the informants' understanding and appreciation of Middle Eastern Literature, as revealed in the major themes elicited in the informants' critical engagements. Overall, this paper shall contribute to the body of knowledge in three ways: as an existing study in literary theory and criticism, as a philosophical discourse on postcolonialism and its remains in developing countries like the Philippines, as well as in the growing study on literary education and cultural studies.

Keywords: Identity Politics, Middle-Eastern Literature, Multiculturalism, Orientalism, Postcolonialism.

1.0 RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Engagement in the Literature classroom should expand the learners' reflexive understanding by developing literary competence and cultural appreciation. Literature class aims to equip students to the world of the text and its milieu by ushering them to the significant human experiences of joy, pain, struggle, and aspiration embedded in the reading and discussion of the literary texts. With that, literature teaching becomes meaningful as teachers of literature bridge the text to the individual and collective reality of the students.

In the outgoing curriculum of the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) in the Philippines, Masterpieces in World Literature is offered as a General Education course, alongside Panitikan ng Pilipinas (Philippine Literature). While the latter focuses on the works of local writers, the former deals with masterpieces of the world, from the myths and epics, to the contemporary works of renowned literary figures. This curriculum is still offered in the past 2 years, until the succession of the 2018 New Curriculum, where World Literature is infused with Philippine Literature, and is only offered in the Senior High School. Therefore, the remaining old curriculum i.e., Masterpieces in World Literature offered at the university may be regarded as the last window of opportunity for university students to engage with multicultural literatures. Findings and discussions gathered from the recent World Literature discourses may significantly help further our research on critical theory, postcolonialism, and multiculturalism, and their interdisciplinary intersections. But in general, any literature classroom should be a safe space for critical discussions pertaining to race, culture and its implications in the real world.

The past recent years probe that despite the advances on dialogues and communication, identity politics is still very evident. The rise of COVID-19 pandemic reveals the systemic problem of racial discrimination. Asian Hate as a phenomenon continues to propagate in the West. Similarly, Black Lives Matter (BLM) has become a movement in the United States, and even beyond. Frankly, BLM movement is not a new struggle as history proves the pursuit of the Black people's plight for equality.

On a Postcolonial perspective, the canon of world literature is seen as a politics of recognition, where recognition of Western literary figures is more prominent than Middle East and Far Eastern literatures. It is in this regard that the critical discourse on the teaching of Middle Eastern literature is necessary, as it grapples not just with the struggle of equal representation in the canon of world literature, but also the identified students' negative perception of the Middle East itself. Edward Said's (1991) critical discourse titled *Orientalism* serves as a framework in the interpretation and analysis of the data, while Identity Politics as the root problem of multiculturalism, where World Literature is anchored on, serves as the critical point of view of this paper.

2.0 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This paper presents a critical discourse on literary and cultural studies, which are all integral to the incessant pursuit of multicultural education. Necessary to the trajectory of this discussion are discourses on orientalism, postcolonialism, and the politics of recognition,

where ideologies and critical perspectives can be drawn out and processed. This paper uses Edward Said's (1991) *Orientalism* and Charles Taylor's (1991, 1994) politics of recognition in multiculturalism, as a critical point of discussion. Likewise, classroom discussions, students' reflections, and critical papers serve as documents in the data gathering procedure of this paper.

Overall, this paper shall contribute to the body of knowledge in three ways: as an existing study in multicultural education, as a philosophical discourse on postcolonialism and its remains in developing countries like the Philippines, as well as in the growing study on literary education and cultural studies.

■ 3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Orientalism

To give context to the critical framework by which the analysis of this research data is anchored on, we need to first take a look at Edward Said's (1991) *Orientalism*. Said (1991) defines Orientalism as a colonial discourse, a way of writing research and discourse about the Orient, and an ontological and epistemological style of thought based on the distinction between the Orient and the Occident (Said, 1978: 10). As such, a significant amount of discourse on political theory, philosophy and literary studies have dealt with the way the Occident, or the West, started in this discourse by establishing first that there is a gap between the two spheres – the Orient being the object of study, or interest, of the Occident, and the Occident, being the dominant point of view.

The central focus in understanding Middle Eastern Literature is the concept of Orientalism. Edward W. Said, as the leading critic of Eurocentric stereotypes in literature and cultural studies, pointed out that the word Orientalism is not just noun form of the adjective "oriental" which means something related to eastern countries, but the misrepresentation and stereotypes of the people and the culture of the Eastern Countries like Middle East, Asia and North Africa. Said used the word Orientalism to refer to the West's perception and depiction of Middle Eastern, Asian and North African societies.

The historical and cultural connection of Orientalism is greatly influenced by the Western colonial advances to the East. Having said that, the Middle East, particularly the Arab and Israeli relationships, as well as India have been the focus of the subject. Following this, Orientalism as a philosophical, socio-cultural and literary lens, is a way of perceiving the Middle East in a "Eurocentric" way. It points out the stereotypes and biases Western-influenced view dictates, resulting to exaggeration and distortion on the differences of Arab peoples and cultures as compared to that of the West. It often involves seeing Arab culture as exotic, backward, uncivilized, mystical, and at times dangerous. In this regard, Orientalism enforces the idea that the West is the East's juxtaposition – the former described to be powerful, innovative, and developed while the latter is regarded as inferior, bizarre, and less developed. Orientalism is a 'Western style for dominating restructuring, and having authority over the Orient' (Said, 1991: 11)

The way the Middle East's history is linked has resulted to a cultural leadership that the West imposed through ideology, knowledge production and what Gramsci (1971) has identified as "hegemony", or the indispensable concept for any understanding of cultural life in the industrial West (Said, 199: 15). Such hegemony is marked by the Western Empire's cultural production depicted by colonial, political and economic distortion of the Orient, making it a complicated and explorative subject matter in Western perspective.

Said claims that Orientalism is an issue of power-relations, on different levels and spheres. According to him, Orientalism:

"...is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the exchange with power political (as with a colonial or imperial establishment), power intellectual (as with reigning sciences like comparative linguistics or anatomy, or any of the modern policy sciences), power cultural (as with orthodoxies and canons of taste, texts, values), power moral (as with ideas about what "we" do and what "they" cannot do or understand as "we" do)".

(Said, 1991: 20)

Therefore, as Said (1991) posits, "Orientalism is not a mere political subject matter or field that is reflected passively by culture, scholarship, or institutions; nor is it a large and diffuse collection of texts about the Orient... it is, above all, a discourse that plots the various kinds of power relations– intellectual, political, cultural, and moral – of the Western Empire to the Orient (Said, 1991). These power relations fuel a bigger issue on individual and cultural recognition known as the politics of recognition.

Postcolonial Remains

Said's theory of postcolonialism, as stated by Hamadi (2014), is mainly anchored on what he considers the false image of the Orient, which refers to the Eastern territories, that is opposite the "West" – being the European center of power. With such false image giving birth to a fabricated, if not distorted, treatment of the East by Western explorers and intellectuals like, poets, novelists, philosophers, and socio-political leaders since Napoleon's occupation of Egypt in 1798. According to Said, these have always shown the Orient as the primitive, uncivilized "other", in an attempt to create it as the contrast to the advanced and civilized West.

With the succeeding colonial exploits and its remains, Said believes that a powerful colonizer has imposed a language and a culture that is Eurocentric, while the local cultures, histories, values, and languages of the Oriental peoples have been slowly eradicated and even distorted by the colonial power (Hamadi, 2014). Such postcolonial activities did not just disappear after colonization. The effects of postcolonialism, which Young (2012) coined as "postcolonial remains" are still consciously and subconsciously operating in a lot, if not all, postcolonial countries.

Young (2012) argued that the attempt to pronounce postcolonialism as a dead theory by some scholars is quite a blind attempt to dismiss its presence that continues to provoke and disturb scholarship at large. He furthers by saying, 'the real problem lies in the fact that the postcolonial remains' (Young, 2012: 19).

Dizayi (2019) in his study on *The Crisis on Identity in Postcolonial Literatures* points out that scholars of the postcolonial era have given immense importance to the idea of identity. This includes the search for their own identity, as well as the questioning of the term “own identity” in a postcolonial perspective, as changes in identity (Gyssels, 2001), effects of imperialism (Sheoran 2014), and Hybridity (Dar, 2013) alters the idea of identity in postcolonial studies.

Bennett (2015), in his book, *Empire and Religions: Colonialism, Postcolonialism, and Orientalism*, narrates five (5) features that typify Western [European] bias in several academic and cultural discourses, based on the narrative developed by David Spurr's (1993). It is a list of “rhetorical features” employed to “construct a coherent representation out of” what describes as the “strange... often incomprehensible realities confronted in the non-European world (Spurr, 1993: 3)

First is that “Most colonial constructions of others were paternalistic. The European ‘knew’ and the native did not. It also assumes a familial relationship” (Spurr, 1993: 3). This means that the assumed relationship of the colonizer to their colonized is that of a paternal figure – a symbolic image of leadership (if not ownership), and subordination. Next is the issue of Polarities, where the Others are viewed as “irrational, dishonest, and immoral, thus they could not be trusted to interpret their own texts” (Spurr, 1993: 3). This is parallel to Said (1978)'s juxtaposition of the West on the East, reducing the latter as a subject of their study. Said claims that the Orient is:

“a whole series of “interests” which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description... [which] expresses, a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world.”

(Said, 1978: 20)

Parallel to that is the third rhetorical feature, which is possession. It posits that everything found in the Orient ‘became European possession, to be exhibited, owned, displayed, and described in a manual’ (Spurr, 1993: 3). Said claims that “the relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (Said, 1991: 13). Therefore, the idea of possession is key to understanding the assumed dominance of the West over the Orient. Next is the concept of privilege. Spurr (1993) exposition claims that “European knowledge and expertise was privileged over non-European”, a claim overly emphasized by Edward Said. Lastly, power – which always give Europeans the “upper hand” (Bennett, 2015).

All these rhetorical features enable researchers, academics, and cultural workers alike, to critically read, interpret, and analyze the recurring politics of recognition among literary and socio-political texts in general.

The Politics of Recognition

Foremost to any social, political and cultural good is recognition. Rawls (1999) calls recognition as a social good that is essential to an individual or a group's meaningful pursuit of life. Not only that but it also constitutes the basic conditions for living a decent life (Rawls, 1999).

In this day and age of shifting socio-political landscape, issues on racial identity, gender identity, nationality, as well as religion and freedom of expression mark the trajectory of 21st century discourse on identity across geo-political spaces. The politics of recognition, as Pilapil (2015) pointed out, “encompasses the issues of identity politics, multiculturalism, group-differentiated right, accommodation of difference, multinationalism, and so on” (Pilapil, 2015. ix). Such discourse is also triggered by globalization, as technology plays a significant role in making people of different spaces aware of the “other.”

Charles Taylor (1991, 1994), a key figure in multicultural philosophy and education, pointed out that the quest for recognition is anchored on the desire for equal recognition and the desire for recognition of difference or distinctness (Pilapil, 2015: 25). On the other hand, Will Kymlicka (1995), a Canadian Political Philosopher, directed the problem of inequality in unequal circumstances – that one's racial origin and cultural membership determine privilege or disadvantage. These issues are dismantled through critical discourse in education. According to Willinsky (1998), education in the politics of recognition can help to equip students with a deeper understanding of the genesis of human categorization, leading to a more profound level of critical thinking in relation to public policy, media reportage, academic scholarship, and the like (Palma, 2014).

Thompson (2005) identifies three features of the struggle for recognition: the ideology of identity and differences, the pursuit of equality and inclusion, and a concern for differential treatment (Thompson, 2005: 7-8). The first struggle reveals the very root of the problem in the politics of recognition, which is identity politics. This results to non-recognition, misrecognition and stereotyping. In connection, Taylor & Gaonkar coined the term *Block Thinking*, referring to the misinformed generalization of a specific group which “fuses a varied reality into a single indissoluble unity” (Gaonkar, 2006: 453). It is in this same manner that Edward Said's (1991) Orientalism points out the politically motivated cultural acceptance or dissent towards the Middle East in particular, and the Orient in general.

While problems already existing among older generations are much more challenging to address, it is the trust of the educational system to prevent these problems from propagating. Hence, recognition of identities in education is a key to mend these gaps. Multicultural pedagogy, therefore, purports an ideal role in revising these cultural disparities.

Multiculturalism in the Literature Classroom

Although history, music and other humanities subjects play an important role in shaping and building our understanding of the Middle East, it is also noteworthy to consider that the role of literature has an impact, equal, if not better, than other disciplines. It is upon the teaching of literature that one formulates an idea of the love of or the discrimination on the people of this region of the world, through character analysis on stories, cultural background teachings on poetry, and so on. In this regard, it is important for humanities teachers and researchers, to make sure that the foundational knowledge about the culture and people of Middle East is presented justly and sufficiently.

Literature is seen as one of the many tools that can be used to understand humanity and culture. Stevens (2019) stated that multicultural literature can be used in order to foster cultural understanding and appreciation as he asserts that it is critical to develop cross-

cultural understanding. Saleem and Ilyas (2019) discussed that the goals of the teaching of literature is to develop literacy, liberalism, and global citizenship as “literature can act as a remedy for widespread cross-cultural misunderstandings, prejudice and global ignorance.” Al Khader (2011) also pointed that studying literature gives students opportunities for personal development and cultural adaptation, allowing them to appreciate and respect cultural diversity thus, enabling them to adapt to a multicultural and global education (Bañez, 2016). Hence, the teaching of literature allows students to recognize other beliefs and traditions as they develop tolerance and appreciation over other cultures.

Significantly, the use of multicultural pedagogy is essential in the literature classroom. More so, methods like philosophical and sociocultural studies are vital on multicultural pedagogy in the humanities. Multicultural literature can be used as a tool to open students’ minds, as stated by Colby and Lyon (2004). It helps to stimulate an understanding of diversity in the classroom and helps in building an understanding of and respect for people from other cultures. Also, multicultural literature can be used to examine stereotypes on races. Literature is a powerful tool to expose, weaken and dissolve racism. Selecting and teaching multicultural literature is a critical and sensitive task for literature instructors as failure to be critical and sensitive to the selection and instruction may offend the cultural group being discussed. The literature must be free of stereotypes in language, illustrations, behaviour, and character traits (Diamond & Moore, 1995). Also, the language used must show sensitivity to the culture as certain terms can be considered very offensive.

Both the multicultural approach to literature and Said’s orientalism are vital in the shaping of students’ understanding and appreciation of Middle Eastern literature. Based on both formative and summative assessments, the students’ thoughts on freedom, oppression, power and stereotypes, among many, are reflective of Said’s three general views on orientalism.

■ 4.0 METHODOLOGY

The Purposive Critical Case sampling was utilized by the researcher in this qualitative study. It is a method widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources (Patton, 2002). Purposive sampling, known as “judgment sampling” is also employed in the selection of particular participants (Tongco, 2007), as well as their knowledge and experience (Bernard, 2002). Moreover, Spradley (1979) note the reaserch participants’ availability and willingness to participate, and the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner. In this study, critical case sampling was used to determine the participants’ reflective and critical perspectives in reading and understanding Middle Eastern literary texts.

Informants of the study

The informants of the study are students of World Literature class in Far Eastern University-Manila. The informants were chosen for their diverse composition in terms of academic specialization, nationality, gender, religious affiliations, and age, among others. They are composed of ten (10) students from Bachelor of Secondary Education major in English, seven (7) from Bachelor of Elementary Education, two (2) from Bachelor of Science in Psychology, six (6) from Bachelor of Arts in Communication, six (6) from Bachelor of Science in Sports Science, and five (5) from Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies. The collective number of informants is composed of thirty-two (32) of Filipinos, one (1) Korean, one (1) Chinese, one (1) Bangladeshi, and one (1) Jordanian. Out of the 36 informants, three (3) identifies as Muslim, two (2) are Buddhist, one (1) atheist, and the remaining thirty (30) are Christian, in different denominations.

Analysis of data

The informants’ accounts were taken from their critical essays, reflection papers, and other discussion points raised during the three-week period allotted to the teaching of Middle Eastern Literature in the World Literature course. The process went through the following steps: first, a profiling of the informants’ background. This is necessary to identify if specific insights are influenced by their academic, cultural, or religious contexts. Second, the researcher assigned different Middle Eastern literary texts. The texts were chosen based on the prescribed syllabus for World Literature by the Commission on Higher Education. Following that, discussions of the different literary texts were done in the period of three-weeks. The critical perspectives of the informants during the discussion were recorded with their consent. Informants were informed that the discussions of the literary texts will be recorded for the purpose of identifying the common themes and critical points about Middle Eastern literature. Lastly, a summative assessment through a critical essay was required in the end of the three weeks of discussion. Overall, the classroom discourses, written essays and critical discussion points were analysed through the lens of Said’s (1991) Orientalism and Taylor’s (1994) Politics of Recognition.

■ 5.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS

This section presents the common themes elicited from the students’ critical essays, discussion points and reflections. Four (4) common themes raised in the several outputs of the students: power relations, canon of literature, role of media, and religion. The themes are arranged in order of the number of responses, which are as follows:

Power Relations

One of the most common observations of the students in the World Literature class is the issue of Power relations – that is, the imbalance and unfair relationship between the West and the East, where the West is deemed superior over the east. This power relation can be manifested in what is called Hegemony, or the cultural leadership that the West imposed through ideology and knowledge (Gramsci, 1971).

Informant 1¹, on her critical essay said: Middle East should be given the opportunity to present themselves and not be judged by the way they were brought by the Western culture and by this opportunity they should be able to create a better image for their culture and literature.

This statement from informant 1 pointed out inability of the Middle East to be equally represented in the body of knowledge free from prejudice and judgment from a Western-influenced outlook of the world. Likewise, informant 2² pointed out the obvious misrepresentation, as well as the lack of recognition, from the present canon of World Literature:

A lot of the characters in the stories we discussed were created by Western perspectives, viewed using the Western-influenced worldview, and analyzed in the Western-dominated ideology. That already communicates a lot about the misrepresentation and imbalance of power-relations in literature, and as students, we should be critical about these things.

Canon of Literature

One of the crucial issues in literary studies is the canon of literature. Students' exposure to literature, and in effect, to cross cultural heritages, are mostly dependent on the canon of literature offered in the curriculum. In the Philippines, literature studies are mostly Western-influenced, other than the local Philippine Literature offered in 1st year high school (grade 7) and Afro-Asian Literature in 2nd year high school (grade 8). The remaining literature classes (3rd year/grade 9) are mostly English and American literatures. Even the world literature class expected in 4th year (grade 10) are littered with Western literatures.

The new curriculum, under the K-12 reform in education, offers 21st century literatures in the Philippines and the World in grade 11. This course, although not taken yet by the informants of this study, who are all products of the out-going curriculum, is geared towards selected local and foreign literatures of the contemporary times. Texts were selected by virtue of recency and relevance. Despite that, Middle Eastern literature is not well represented even in this new reform. Needless to say, the canon of literature is a huge problem in postcolonial settings like the Philippines, where influence of the Western scholarship is predominant.

In the initial discussions in World Literature class, the students were asked to recall and share their knowledge of the Middle Eastern literatures in their previous literature classes, which means their high school and early college years, if any.

Here are some of the responses of the informants:

Informant 3³: Growing up, I have never been exposed to much literatures from the Middle East or Arab writers. I have little knowledge of them because of the stories about them, like Aladdin from Disney. Most of the things I know about the Arabs in general are things that I watched from the news.

Informant 4⁴: I remember my entire high school English classes are all about stories and poems from the Philippines, America and England, and Asia, which is mostly China and Japan. I can't remember much about the Middle East. Maybe the film we watched about Sinbad. I'm not even sure if it's Middle Eastern. It looks like one.

One of the popular Disney animated films is Aladdin and the Magic Lamp. In the Philippines, its popularity has been established since Filipina Artist Lea Salonga played the singing voice of Princess Jasmine. Likewise, the popularity of the said film has led teachers to using it as instructional material in the teaching of literature, as stated by student 1. Despite its popularity, a lot of identified harmful stereotypes on the Middle East has been pointed out by several scholars and literary critics. These misrepresentations are also parallel to the portrayal of Western news and media towards the Arab people. Like student 2's response, exposure to the Middle East is more accessible in news than in the canon of literature. Hence, these misrepresentations about the Middle East were media-influenced, more than literature-influenced. In this regard, the lack of Middle Eastern texts in the canon of literature deprives students and teachers of a healthy academic discourse about their people and culture.

The lack of proper Middle Eastern representation in the canon of literature can also result to students' confusion on the authenticity of the Arab identity. Often, among Filipino students, the difference of the Arab people from Indian people is blurred. This is seen in the response of student 5:

Informant 5⁵: Does that include Indian literature? It's the closest I can recall. During our fourth year in high school, we watched the film Three Idiots. Other than that, I can't remember anything in our high school literature classes other than Shakespeare and Mark Twain.

Although the difference is mostly physical, this is detrimental to the building of proper understanding of the Arab people. Pilapil (2015) said that beyond the notion that each one belongs to "common humanity" in terms of identity, the acknowledgement of individual and cultural identity is still essential because "each person possesses attributes and personalities that cannot be shared with others" (p.5). More so, Taylor (1994) claims that each individual being has an original (authentic) measure that is uniquely his/her own. Hence, this authenticity is also essential to the recognition of racial and ethnic differences.

¹ The informant is a Filipino student under the Bachelor of Secondary Education program, major in English. The informant is a Catholic, male, 20 years old.

² Informant 2 is also a Filipino, taking Bachelor of Elementary Education program. She is a female, 21 years-old catholic student.

³ Informant 3 is a Chinese female student taking Bachelor of Secondary Education, major in English. She is identified as Buddhist, and she grew up in Hong Kong before her family moved to Manila, Philippines for her college education.

⁴ Informant 4 is a Filipino male student under the Bachelor of Arts Communication program. He identifies as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community. He also indicated that he is an atheist.

⁵ Informant 5 is a 21 years-old male under the Bachelor of Science in Sports Science program. He identifies as an Evangelical Christian.

Role of Media

Ha and Shin (2016) argue that Western writers of literature expose stereotypes on characters and settings, which reflects the way the image of the Orient is projected, usually as exotic and dangerous (p. 601). Informant 6 pointed out the effects of harmful portrayal of the Middle Eastern people in various media platforms.

Informant 6⁶: I admit I still view Middle East as a dangerous place considering a lot of Filipinos who work there, most of them, have a problem with their employers. Especially those domestic helpers, most of them were physically and sexually abused by their employers as per the news in social media. It came to a point where in overseas Filipino workers were forced to escape by climbing backyards and tying ropes on the terrace. It's hard to view it as a majestic place when all you hear on the media is bad news from your fellowmen who tries to give their families a beautiful life by going there to work and ended up getting beaten or killed.

The problem of representation is magnified through media. The role of media significantly affects how people and cultures are described and even defined. While some texts are propagated through media, its production is seen as a space for power struggle, as Western-based ownership and influence shape the way the world sees a text. Such productions like films and television, and even social media content show misrepresentation of Middle East.

Religion

We do not only define our own identity in terms of individual characteristics, as Pilapil (2015) argues, but also in terms of our social space and the social environment we are in. This includes, language, culture and religion, among many. Similarly, the right of the Middle Eastern people to be represented ethically and free from malicious biases is necessary to a healthy discourse about their identity.

Collectively, Arab people are predominantly Muslims, contrary to the Western world where Christianity is mostly practiced. The Christian-Muslim conflict is not just a matter of deeply rooted historical struggles, but also a matter of power-relations. Since the assumed powerful influence, or hegemony, is from the West, the tendency to misrepresent the Muslim people in their narrative, whether deliberate or by sheer lack of knowledge, is widely spread across nations. Likewise, in the Philippines, access to Western-influenced media and resources has resulted to harmful stereotypes and racism.

Informant 7⁷: I've personally come across different people that doesn't really show much compassion for Muslims and their culture. To them, being able to grow up and see how the media portray Muslims and Arab-Islamic has greatly affected their view towards them. Many social experiments across the internet and YouTube platforms have shown a lot of people that have come to detest most Muslims because of how they were perceived. Rather than helping the Muslims in these shown experiments they've chosen to ignore them.

■ 6.0 DISCUSSIONS

From these results, a critical discussion on how the Filipino and other Asian informants processed and arrived at their conjectures. The informants shared their vicarious experience of the Middle Eastern literatures, using critical perspectives on postcolonialism and multiculturalism. Central to the discussion is how identity politics were implicitly and explicitly pointed out by the students in the areas of power-relations, canon of literature, role of media, and religion, as highlighted in the results.

Literature and art, in general, as a socio-cultural document, positions us, as Schultz (2002) highlights the importance of experiencing vicariously the culture presented in literature. Among which is our perception of ancient to contemporary Middle East as underscored in selected literary texts in a world literature class.

It is seen that the informants' encounter with Middle Eastern Literature is deeply attached to their personal and social realities, and even their national sentiments. Views on freedom, oppression, discrimination, nationalism and hegemony are some of the common discussion points highlighted in their critical papers. Their understanding, and appreciation of Middle Eastern literature is linked to their perspective Asians or "Orientals," and their conjectures on postcolonial issues and the politics of recognition.

Coming from the elicited findings from academic engagements in the World Literature classroom, it is interesting, as well as critical, to note that the series of engagements reveal how the Middle East is mostly misrepresented, stereotyped and misunderstood. In the three-week discussion and activity, we have conducted, students' schema, knowledge of existing texts, and perception of this people group. They reveal their inadequate, if not improper, view of the Middle East. Several factors affect that including insufficient literary texts, lack of proper understanding of historical and socio-cultural background, and the prominence of Western canon of literature and media. Later on, the informants' reflection and critical essays reveal their progressive knowledge and understanding of Orientalism and Multiculturalism.

To begin with, the perceived binary opposition between the West and the East highlights the age-old imbalance, if not oppressive power relations between both spheres. Postcolonial criticism often detects and deconstructs the binary opposites inherent in power relations such as other-self, margin-center, and colonizer-colonized (Shands, 2007). In terms of knowledge production, this power relation is distinctly seen in several literatures, where Western thought is deemed superior and more established than the Eastern opposite. According to Foucault (1990), the goals of power and the goals of knowledge cannot be separated; 'in knowing we control'. This means that the ideology of the West about its binary opposite is considered a form of power and authority over the East, expressing a form of control over

⁶ Informant 6 is a 23 years-old female student taking Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies. She identifies as Catholic

⁷ Informant 7 is a 19 years-old female under the Bachelor of Science in Psychology program. She is a Muslim and is actively involved in the student council of the university.

what should be known, how those things should be known, and how such knowledge will be propagated as an established truth about the Orient.

Informants easily pointed out the imbalance when it comes to power relations. The increasing interest, if not bias, on the Western ideologies, not to mention the availability of more scholarly works (if not their prominence) over local studies already communicates a lot about an implied imbalance. Here, students pointed out that most of the scholarly works are consulted and approved by Western ideologies and philosophies, to create such “validity” and “acceptance”. While this may not be supposed case in scholarships, it is still an indicator of how they were exposed to such belief in their basic education. This is an effect of the still unpopularity of decolonizing curriculum efforts. There are recently significant numbers of works in this area, particularly in huge teacher-education institutions like Philippine Normal University, University of the Philippines, De La Salle University, and other huge universities, but the vast majority of the curriculum still needs to be decolonized. In this regard, the postcolonial remains are still evident, if not predominant.

Another area that students impliedly pointed out is the exposure to the canon of literature that we know, or at least still in circulation. Questions about the canon of literature has been essential in postcolonial studies. The established canon of literature that circulates among educational institutions is rooted on the Western Empire’s standards; hence, it’s authority has been put to criticism for its worldviews and ideology. Bhabha said, “[t]he canonical ‘center’ may, indeed, be most interesting for its elusiveness, most compelling as an enigma of authority” (Bhaba, 1994: xi).

In reviewing the canon of literature, a small amount of representative text from the Middle East may only be referred to in World Literature on the discussion of ancient texts such as epics and creation stories. The majority of the text in the canon were written by Continental and Anglo-American writers, with big names such as Shakespeare, Hemingway, Hugo, Tolstoy, Dickens, and Bronte, among many. Another concern is how Middle East is depicted in some of the Western literatures in the canon, bearing stereotypes, racism, and misrepresentation.

In the Philippines, exposure to Central Asian and the Middle Eastern literature is often always limited to the epics and creation stories, such as the Epic of Gilgamesh, Persian Myths, Selected poetry such as Omar Khayyam’s Rubaiyat and the One Thousand and One Tales of Middle Ages period. Interesting enough, when informants are asked about what they know about middle Eastern literature, Arabic texts, Central Asian stories or poems, and other contributions from the area, they are always left with a poorly-represented movie or story from Disney, or misrepresented insignificant characters in popular films, if not harmfully parodied comedic acts. Popular alternatives like Disney’s Aladdin and the Magic Lamp and classic films on the adventures of Sinbad have long been used and at times forgotten. Hence, Middle Eastern literature as part of the World Literature curriculum is almost always misrepresented and understudied. The lack of literary text in the canon of prescribed literatures is a challenge of availability, of scholarships, as well as of representation.

In Taylor’s (1994) Multiculturalism, Identity politics is often rooted in the nonrecognition and misrecognition of pluralistic identities. Taylor claims:

“Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being ... misrecognition shows not just a lack of due respect. It can inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred. Due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need.”

(Taylor, 1994: 98)

Media plays a huge role in reinforcing these through the circulation of ideology and identity they commodify. In a recent study by Alam (2020) on the Framing of Bangladesh in U.S. Media, he pointed out the critical damage of improper framing in media. According to him, frame analysis in a postcolonial perspective creates and distributes ideologies that may be beneficial or harmful to the subject and its scope (Alam, 2020). Framing here refers to the way information is created, arranged and presented in media platforms. Entman (1993) posits that framing ‘essentially involves selection and salience.’ Selection refers to the deliberate choosing of a piece of text, written or virtual, while the word salience refers to the presentation of information that makes it ‘more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences’ (1993: 51).

A lot of this framings in media are unexamined, especially in their production of literary works. Depictions of characters in movies about the Middle East and the Far East have become the point of criticism in several scholarly works, as Ha and Shin (2016) specify in his exposition of character, settings and stereotypes in literature as a form of identity politics.

In the Philippines, several depictions of literary, and even commercial texts may be examined thoroughly in the lens of postcolonialism and identity politics. Representations of culture, religion, skin colour, education, and different realities, is still predominantly creating a Western more privileged acceptance over Oriental – usually subordinate, victim, weak, pitiful representation. Look, for example, at how characters in Filipino films or *teleseryes* depict the privileges of being educated in the West, the creation of whiter-better illusions on skin and identity, the creation of a better life in a Western setting versus the curse of being poor in the Philippines, as well as the misrepresentation, if not the lack of representation of the natives and the indigenous. These representations, to name a few, are all over media. It creates a false ideology that Western is better, and ours is of lower, usually uncelebrated reality. To be bombarded with all of those in the Philippines creates, if not conditions one’s belief and outlook in general.

Cere (2020) pointed out on her study about hegemony and counter-hegemony in media studies, that there should be a re-examining of media in general, and everything that is produced ‘to delve in more depth into the representations of colonized people; into questions of race, power and ideology; into issues pertaining to multi-cultural societies, immigration, diaspora and globalization’ (Cere, 2020: 15)

Alam (2020) added that in the postcolonial perspective, media framing that is unexamined and predominantly Western may distorted reality presented about the Orient, particularly on how they are ‘produced, reproduced, and distributed through Western media framing,’ hence the other is depicted as ‘inferior, backward, violent, and so on’ (Alam, 2020).

Included in the discourse on media and representation is how religion is portrayed in media and films, and to some extent, social media. The still misrepresented image of the Muslims, for example, as terrorists, people of violence, mystical and weird, among many, continue to be part of the postcolonial remains that even in the Philippines, would still be challenging to destroy.

In an interesting discourse with students, some pointed out that a lot of social media jokes and comedic vlogs still misrepresent the Muslim people as harmful. Although this is an age-old problem that we all have hoped to end, the riddle effect of media on religion is still in effect today. This is rooted on the centuries of misrepresentation of the Christian-West in portraying the Orient. As Said (1991) exposes how the West reduced the Orient as a subject of their study, it politicizes their intent to account an unbiased view of the Eastern religions – reducing it to a matter of their own interpretation, instead of an authentic reality represented by the natives. Bennett (2015) in his study on empires and religions, proposes that we should adhere to a religious study that is ‘participatory, involving more perspectives, instead of just the West’. In this regard, scholarship and academic endeavours will be pluralized, destabilizing a Western politically-motivated mono-ideology (Bennett, 2015).

Since religious discourses are also personal, its personal dimension should be authentic among members of a certain community. An imposition of a collective, Western dominant ideology on religion, like Islam, leads to identity politics, as the more dominant ideology, in terms of power, always define the rules of the game – eliminating the authenticity of the individual’s personal dimension. Authenticity, once compromised, may lead to a politics of recognition, imposed and conditioned by [Western] hegemony, hence the emphasis on developing one’s authentic identity – religiously, culturally, racially, even linguistically, must be reinforced in our pedagogy.

Along with the development of one’s individual unique religious and racial identity is what Taylor (1994) claims as the birth of moral ideal of ‘Authenticity’, which according to him is being true to one’s particular way of living (cited: Pilapil, 2015: 5). Taylor continues, ‘Not only should I not mold my life to the demands of external conformity; I can’t even find the model by which to live outside myself. I can only find it within (Taylor, 1994: 30). Failure to address these issues on religion may develop what Taylor and Gaonkar (2006) termed as block thinking or the structured bias of one [usually dominant] voice over the other [lesser].

To address these issues on power-relation, canon of literature, media and religion, Bennett (2015) proposed five (5) critical points to be considered: partnership, pluralism, provisionality, politicization, and personalization. I believe that these proposals, contextualized in multicultural philosophy, allow academics to see scholarly discourses as a partnership, instead of one-sided area of study. Inclusion among scholars of different [pluralistic] races and cultures play a significant role in developing holistic views on literary studies, making it more multicultural. Likewise, a continuously developing and provisional treatment on the subject matter of postcolonialism and multiculturalism is necessary to eliminate identity politics in the teaching of literature. Also, its implication to the politics of recognition is significant as reflected in the informants personal and authentic experiences.

■ 7.0 CONCLUSION

The continues struggle embedded in postcolonialism is not just an old discourse to remember and study in schools, but also a recurring, often times neglected, if not deliberately eliminated, discourse on history, culture, and its implications in present times. In this regard, the postcolonial remains. There are remains of these truths, as Young (2012) puts it, and that those remains continue to ‘remain’ in our times.

Postcolonialism is not just a disciplinary field, nor is it a theory which has or has not come to an end. Rather, its objectives have always involved a wide-ranging political project—to reconstruct Western knowledge formations, reorient ethical norms, turn the power structures of the world upside down, refashion the world from below.

(Young, 2012: 20)

Said’s Orientalism (1991) unearths the issues that West becomes the East’s juxtaposition – where the former is always regarded to be ‘powerful, innovative, and developed’ while the latter is regarded as ‘inferior, bizarre, and less developed’, hence, this Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient (Said, 1991. p.11) continues to create what Charles Taylor (1991/1994) claims to be a form of identity politics, or the politics of recognition.

In this study, informants’ critical perspectives on Middle Eastern Literature as part of their World Literature classroom, mirrors the postcolonial remains that ‘remain’ to be problematic and harmful. As Saleem and Ilayas (2019) pointed out the importance of literature in the shaping of global citizenship, it is our trust as literature teachers to advocate for what Bañez (2016) stated as multicultural and global education.

World literature as a (then-) general education course, provides a wide and deep selection of critical points that a 21st century student should be exposed with. It’s counterpart in the new curriculum of the Senior High School, 21st Century Literatures from the Philippine and the World, may be a good opportunity to continue problematizing and addressing issues on race, stereotypes, and the postcolonial remains in the Philippines, and in connection, in the global perspective.

This paper exposes four (4) major problems in the discourse on Middle Eastern Literature namely: imbalance of power-relations, lack of inclusion in the canon of literature, role of media in propagating stereotypes and harmful representations, as well as its effect on problematic views on religion -particularly among our Muslim communities. As a recommendation, we need to continue the discourse on postcolonialism and multiculturalism not just in the tertiary level of education, but now in the K-12 curriculum of Department of Education (DepEd), where world literature is included as a core subject. Likewise, critical engagements among researchers in the field should continue to produce works that will serve as opportunities for further study. Areas such as multiculturalism and identity politics in the Philippine education is an area that needs to continue to flourish. A local, decolonized authentic research and instructional materials must continue to propagate in the academe.

It is imperative of us, the literature and cultural researchers to appropriate the works of Said (1991) and Taylor’s (1991/1994) Identity Politics, and the several scholarships on postcolonialism in the present-day discourses on literature, multicultural philosophy, and identity politics, to address the postcolonial remains that continue to remain.

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The paper was inspired by my students in the Institute of Education, Far Eastern University-Manila. Likewise, this study is dedicated to the literature teachers who tirelessly make every effort to elevate the dignity of literature teaching as a profession.

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