

Arab Students' Perspectives on the Value of Literature

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Abstract—While the value of literature has long been the subject of lively debate in Western universities, little attention has been given to how most Arab learners perceive it. The key concern of the present paper is to analyze literature's value for Arab students in general and for Sultan Qaboos University students in particular. To this end, the study begins with a review of the myriad benefits (social, educational and personal) claimed for literature. It then examines literature's negative social and learning impacts on SQU students. Based on a questionnaire conducted among 25 prospective SQU English majors, including Translation, Arts and English Education students, the study revealed that literature, in their view, still has a high value on account of its numerous advantages, the most important being its enhancement of their language competence, despite obsolete teaching methods likely to kill their taste for it. Finally, the paper recommends that modes of teaching create a philletic environment, and that new literature circles be created to sensitize students to the value of literature at an earlier stage of their lives in order to cultivate a stronger passion and love for literature in them.

Index Terms—SQU students, value of literature, impacts, benefits, drawbacks

I. INTRODUCTION

It is hard to deny the importance of literature in our lives as it has been a significant part of human education and civilization for so long, still represents a mirror reflecting and shaping most societies around the world, and is “made out of the lore of life” (Kantor, 2006). Literature has, indeed, brought about a number of social, economic, educational and political changes in different societies, which leaves no room for doubt that its impact is large, whether positive or negative. Thus, many scholars and educationists have demonstrated that literature has a high value and is well perceived in Western universities. Its positive effects are mainly social, personal and linguistic, while the negative effects mainly entail its irrelevance to the job market and the risk of excluding students from an active role in life.

Literature Review

Mainstream scholars and educationists argue that literature has many advantages and can contribute to the social, educational and personal development of students. The central focus of this review is to shed light on literature's value as seen in mainstream universities, and also to examine its disadvantages from the perspective of scholars, researchers and students.

Literature's social benefits: Literature, by its nature, offers many social benefits for the individual and society as a whole. For instance, Shah (2013) maintains that studying literature can help students to benefit socially and understand the struggle and suffering of humankind. Similarly, Judith Caesar (2007 as quoted in Ismail, 2008) states that through reading narratives, students can sympathize with and understand people's pain and suffering. She adds that literature leads us to raise questions and provides us with a profound understanding of different issues in life.

Shah (2013) also argues that literature is a means through which several social issues can be addressed and criticized in an attempt to bring about societal change. He further states that “literature has had a major impact on the development of society, [that] it has shaped civilizations, changed political systems and exposed injustice” (p. 20).

In a similar vein, Roe and Ross (2006) maintain that literature is a source of pleasure for readers, helps them to escape from everyday troubles, and entertains their free time. The authors add that it can help children to enlarge their horizons through varied and exciting experiences. In other words, literature, they say, helps children to “visit new places, gain new experiences, meet new people; learn about the past as well as the present and learn about a variety of cultures, including their own” (p. 33).

Roe and Ross' s argument (2006) corroborates Shah's view (2013) on literature's social benefits, arguing that, through it, children will have a chance to read about people's problems and troubles, which in turn will help them to reflect on and solve their own problems.

Similarly, Sell (2005) points out that literature represents a “cultural enrichment” since it helps to promote a better understanding of other cultures and offers closer access to any society's heritage and culture. This perspective is shared

by Hismanoglu (2005) who also views literature as a means of cultural enrichment. The author further argues that literary works with their different genres can help to provide a better understanding and a colorful picture of the social and regional background of any particular society. This can be achieved, in his view, through the different characters, their thoughts, ideas and actions.

Al-Khader (2005) adopts a similar posture toward the social benefits of literature, maintaining that it helps students to adapt to cultural differences and remove possible bias or prejudice against other cultures.

Literature's educational advantages: Literature offers many educational benefits. Extensive research has shown it to be a very useful resource if students wish to improve their language skills. Cruz (2010) states that literature is a rich, authentic source that exposes students to how language is used and spoken. Through literature, he argues, students can obtain a wide range of vocabulary and various sentence structures that will in turn help them greatly to improve their language. The author adds that "a literary text provides students with a much clearer idea about the syntactic structure of a written text and to what extent written language differs from spoken language, thus they will get used to the formation and function of sentences" (2010, p. 4).

The same view of literature's educational benefits is adopted by Adedoya (2010) who argues that its study helps students to acquire language and become proficient. He also demonstrates that it helps students to build up a bank of vocabulary and improve their reading skills through exposure to a variety of texts.

The ideas in Kulkarni (2013) mesh with Adedoya's assumption that reading literary works provides readers with a wide perspective on life and improves skills and abilities. Kulkarni concludes that literature increases one's knowledge and makes readers aware of the many and diverse aspects of life.

The learning benefits of literature are also emphasized by Sell (2005) who argues that literary works represent a better training for the brain than any other discipline. Through literature, the author claims, students can develop their sense of logic and acquire the ability to question and refute random views or biased ideas. Literature is also regarded as a good "linguistic model" in so far as it demonstrates to students how language is used and written appropriately, and how various situations are expressed.

Roe and Ross (2006) also assume that literature exposes children to "correct sentence patterns, standard story structures, and varied word usage" (p. 33). In addition, it also helps students to improve their language, gain new terms and vocabulary, and enhance thinking skills through reasoning exercises. To sum up, it appears from the various studies discussed above that literature offers myriad learning benefits.

Literature's personal benefits: Many scholars have argued that literature also helps students to gain personal benefits beside social and educational advantages. For instance, Al-Khader (2005) maintains that literature makes students write and speak independently and helps them to express their thoughts freely and confidently. He also points out that literature, by its nature, enables students to express their personal views freely and independently. He further argues that, through literature, students can be taught to accept random answers and not become easy victims of the "twin polarities of correct and incorrect answers" (p. 1).

Al-Khader (2005) also argues that literature "contributes in developing a new self with a fresh outlook towards others, enriches students' experiences and adds to their repertoire of knowledge" (p. 4). He adds that literature builds students' individuality and stimulates them to express their opinions in a creative manner whenever they deal with a literary text. He concludes that it also helps students to be more open and recognize the fact that there is always more than one possible option and more than one possible way of life. It is clear from the articles discussed above that literature has not only social and educational benefits but also personal advantages, which can be reflected and seen in many students.

The disadvantages of literature: Having discussed the positive effects of literature, it is essential now to consider its negative effects as well.

The irrelevance of literature degrees to the job market: One of the drawbacks of a literature degree, it is claimed, is its irrelevance to the job market. Berube (2013), a professor and director of the Institute for the Arts and Humanities at Pennsylvania State University, admits that literature, as part of the humanities, assists students to gain many written and spoken skills which can be of great use in the workplace, but says that a student can do nothing with a certificate in this field. This feeling of discomfort and anxiety about the irrelevance of a literature degree in the marketplace is also shared by most parents, as he points out. It is a waste of time and effort, according to them, to spend years studying literature and then find no job. The author concludes that literature "serves no practical purposes in the real world" (p.11).

Transforming students to bookworms: Another disadvantage of studying literature lies in the risk of turning students into bookworms. Surveying the negative effects, Esperanza (2012) maintains that students are sometimes conditioned to read particular texts which could be boring and of no interest to them. He illustrates his point with the example of an instructor who has explained everything about Emily Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*, leaving no room for discussion. For this reason, the author believes that students should not be forced to read novels or stories they are not interested in because they will learn nothing from the experience.

Reprise: In a nutshell, mainstream researchers and scholars have stressed the idea that literature has a high value among students and unmasked both its positive and negative impacts. The positive effects are social, educational and personal, while the negative effects relate mainly to the uselessness of literature degrees for the job market and the risk of transforming students into passive bookworms (Esperanza, 2012). Many of these studies were conducted in English-speaking countries, however, thus paying scanty attention to Arab nations in general and to Oman in particular. This

paper therefore considers it important to undertake further research into the question in an Omani context. Given the scope of the paper, the investigation is limited to students in the English department only. To this effect, a questionnaire was designed and distributed to English department students at Sultan Qaboos University (henceforth SQU) in order to come up with new results and findings on the possible negative and positive effects of literature study.

II. METHODOLOGY

Since this study aims to shed more light on the value of literature and the different impacts of literature courses on prospective SQU English majors, the main concern of the questionnaire is, accordingly, to raise the following key questions and strive to come up with answers and further recommendations:

1. What is the impact of literature courses on prospective SQU English majors?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of studying literature at SQU?
3. How do English majors, including Arts, Education and Translation students, perceive literature?

A. Participants

The study involved students from three SQU English majors, namely Arts, Education and Translation. The questionnaires were distributed to 25 students, six of whom were translation students, five education students and the rest Arts students. Most questionnaires were distributed to Arts students since they take many literature courses. The participants were of both sexes, nine males and 16 females, in order to find out if there was any significant difference in their results. According to their year of study, two participants were first-year students, one was in his second year, six were in their third year, 13 were in their fourth year and three were in their fifth year. The majority, therefore, were fourth-year students. Table I below shows the range of participants according to their year of study:

TABLE I.
RANGE OF PARTICIPANTS ACCORDING TO YEAR OF STUDY

Year of study	Frequency	Percentage
1	2	8%
2	1	4%
3	6	24%
4	13	52%
5	3	12%

B. Results and Analysis

The benefits of literature: The first section of the questionnaire was divided into two parts and focused on the major advantages and disadvantages of studying literature. The first three questions focused on literature's social benefits. To begin with, 76% of the students agreed that studying literature made them sympathize with other people and understand their pains and suffering; 20% of them were neutral; while 4% disagreed with the idea that literature has social benefits. In the second question, students were asked if studying literature could help them to solve their problems. It was found that 48% agreed, 24% were neutral, and the rest disagreed. The third question asked students if studying literature could enhance their understanding of other cultures; the majority agreed that it could, which is in line with Roe and Ross's assumption on the social benefits of studying literature (2006). For further clarification, Table II below shows the percentages of students who agreed and disagreed about literature's social benefits:

TABLE II.
STUDENTS' BELIEFS ON THE SOCIAL VALUE OF LITERATURE

Statements	agree	disagree	neutral
Studying literature makes me sympathize with other people and understand their pains and suffering	76%	4%	20%
Studying literature helps me to solve my own problems	48%	28%	24%
Studying literature enhances my understanding of other cultures and various racial groups	96%	-	4%

The next five questions were about literature's educational benefits. Students were asked if studying literature could help them to gain a wide vocabulary, and all of them agreed that it could. This supports Cruz's claim that literature helps to gain a lot of useful vocabulary (2010). The next question asked students if studying literature could help them to improve their writing and speaking skills. 88% of respondents agreed, 3% were neutral and 8% disagreed. Students were also asked if studying literature could improve their reading skills through exposure to various literary genres, and the majority agreed it could; just two students who disagreed, which I assume is insignificant. The next question, which asked students if studying literature could enhance their thinking skills, elicited a positive response from 84%, while 16% were neutral. The last question in this section asked students if studying literature could enrich their minds with ideas and thoughts about life in general. The majority agreed, although two students were neutral and two disagreed.

It is clear from the data obtained that educational benefits are the most dominant advantages of studying literature. It can also be deduced that literature courses help students to increase their vocabulary and as a result increase their language proficiency. This leads us to the conclusion that students have a high esteem for literature since it is very likely to enhance and improve their language competence, as Table III below illustrates:

TABLE III.
STUDENTS' BELIEFS ON THE EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF LITERATURE

Statements	agree	neutral	disagree
Studying literature helps me to obtain a wide range of vocabulary.	100%	-	-
Studying literature helps me to improve my writing and reading skills.	88%	4%	8%
Studying literature improves my reading skills through exposure to various literary genres.	92%	-	8%
Studying literature enhances my thinking skills	84%	16%	-
Studying literature enriches my mind with many ideas and thoughts about life.	84%	8%	8%

After addressing literature's social and educational benefits, the questionnaire moved to focus on its personal advantages. The following questions asked students if literature could make them think freely and independently, to which 14 out of the 25 respondents agreed, while eight were neutral and three disagreed. The last question asked students if literature could help them to express their views freely, and responses showed that 17 agreed, six were neutral, and the rest disagreed, as the table below demonstrates:

TABLE IV.
STUDENTS' BELIEFS ON THE PERSONAL VALUE OF LITERATURE

Statements	agree	neutral	disagree
Studying literature makes me think freely and independently.	56%	32%	12%
Studying literature helps me to express my views freely	68%	24%	8%

SQU students also identified the following benefits of literature courses:

- Literature helps students to fill their leisure and free time by providing something useful and related to their lives.
- Literature helps students to master a huge bank of words and vocabulary and to understand other cultures.
- Literature enriches students' knowledge.
- Literature can help students to become good writers.
- Literature broadens students' minds and attitudes towards life.
- Literature helps students to analyze people's traits and qualities.
- Literature offers a picture of many ancient civilizations and illustrates the way of life of people who lived during a particular era.

The drawbacks of literature: While literature courses offer myriad advantages, there are also several disadvantages, and the questionnaire, accordingly, gave them equal attention.

The first question asked students if literature courses made them bookworms, to which nine out of 25 agreed, nine disagreed and the rest were neutral. The second question asked whether literature courses limited students to texts they were not interested in, and the majority agreed, while seven disagreed and four were neutral. The next question asked if literature courses were a waste of time and effort; 21 out of 25 disagreed, with three neutral and only one agreeing. The fourth question asked students if there was a lack of jobs in the market for literature and arts graduates. The response was that nine of them agreed, six disagreed and 10 were neutral, as they did not seem to have enough information about this issue. The next question asked if literature courses tackled any taboo issues that might be harmful to students' minds. While nine were neutral, most respondents agreed that certain issues raised in literature courses were ethically unacceptable and against their traditions and customs. For a clearer picture of student responses and impressions, the table below illustrates them in detail:

TABLE V.
STUDENTS' BELIEFS ON THE DISADVANTAGES OF LITERATURE

Statements	agree	neutral	disagree
Studying literature makes me a bookworm.	36%	28%	36%
Studying literature conditions me to certain texts I am not interested in.	56%	16%	28%
Studying literature is just a waste of time and effort.	4%	12%	84%
There is a lack of jobs in the market for literature majors.	36%	40%	24%
Literature tackles issues that are harmful to me.	12%	36%	52%
Literature pollutes and corrupts my mind by inculcating queer thoughts and ideas that conflict with my customs and religion.	16%	24%	60%

As we can see from the table above, most students agreed that literature limits them to particular texts, be they poems, stories or other literary genres, in which they are not interested; this is in line with Esperanza's assumption about the disadvantages of literature courses (2012). Other students were neutral and agreed with the claim that there is a lack of jobs for students specializing in literature and the humanities in general.

Students also pointed out that literature has other flaws, which they summarized as follows:

- Literature brings up certain ideas that conflict with students' traditions, customs and religion.
- Literature sometimes presents taboo issues that students have no desire to study.
- Literature offers classical poems and texts that are too complicated to be absorbed.
- Literature is sometimes very boring and a waste of time and effort.
- Most texts tackled in literature point out the darker side of life, which makes students desperate.

In brief, the questionnaire was a great source of new ideas, thoughts and suggestions provided by SQU students.

III. FINDINGS

This study discovered that SQU students place a high value on literature and believed that its educational effect is its most prominent benefit. The study also revealed that most students are interested in literature mainly to improve their language in general and to learn new words, which in turn will help them to increase their language competence. This finding, in fact, confirms not only Roe and Ross's assertions (2006) but also Adedjoja's argument that literature helps students to build a wide range of vocabulary (2010).

In addition to language learning benefits, the study also found that literature has social advantages, the most dominant being that it helps students to understand other cultures and the customs of people from different backgrounds. This finding is in line with the claims advanced by both Hismanoglu (2005) and Al-Khader (2005) about literature's social benefits.

The study also unmasked certain drawbacks of literature such as its tendency to transform students into bookworms, which is in line with Esperanza's argument regarding the disadvantages of studying literature (2012). The study also found that literature courses restrict students to literary texts they are not interested in.

Finally, the study demonstrated that there was a lack of jobs for humanities and English major graduates, which reflects Berube's view on the irrelevance of a literature degree to the employment market (2013).

IV. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study attempted to find out whether Arab students place a high value on literature and accordingly investigated the negative and positive impacts of literature courses on prospective SQU English majors. The research proved that literature still enjoys a high status among Arab students in general and among SQU students in particular.

The study also stressed the idea that literature has a myriad social, educational and personal advantages, of which the linguistic benefits are the most valuable and dominant. In addition, the study revealed that literature courses have several disadvantages, the most prominent of which is that they limit students to particular literary texts imposed by instructors and in which most students show no interest.

Although the project was limited in scope and only involved a relatively small number of students, it managed to identify most important advantages and disadvantages of studying literature at SQU. One of the advantages is that the study of literature enriches students' minds and widens or broadens their knowledge. One of the disadvantages, according to respondents, is that it contains old, classical texts that students find hard to absorb. In addition, it was found that literature raises taboo issues that conflict with students' religion and traditions.

Based on these findings, the study has demonstrated, on the one hand, that literature has a high value among SQU students. On the other, it also recommends that further research be conducted in order to check whether literature has the same value in other Arab educational institutions and among other Arab students. Findings also suggest that more effort should be made to identify other advantages and disadvantages of studying literature in the Arab world. Finally, this study invites the Omani Ministry of Education to reconsider the value and importance of literature for students by integrating it into the school curriculum at an earlier stage so as to inspire a love of literary works. To fulfil this aim, the paper finally suggests that modes of teaching should create a philletic learning environment and that literature circles should be created to promote interest in literature among Omani school pupils and university students.

APPENDIX. QUESTIONNAIRE

Arab Students' Perspectives on the Value of English Literature: Sultan Qaboos University as a Case Study

This study aims to discover the effects of literature courses on prospective SQU English majors. Kindly fill in the questionnaire, and be assured that your answers will be used only for research purposes.

Section 1: Background information

Please answer the following questions:

1. Gender: ☐ male ☐ female
2. Major: ☐ English, Education ☐ English, Arts ☐ Translation
3. Year of study:
4. Number of literature courses taken:

Section 2:

For every item, please tick next to the column that best describes your response:

SD: Strongly disagree, D: Disagree, N: Neutral, A: Agree, SA: Strongly agree.

BENEFITS OF STUDYING LITERATURE

Items	Statements	D	N	A
1	Studying literature makes me sympathize with other people and understand their pains and suffering.			
2	Studying literature helps me to solve my own problems.			
3	Studying literature enhances my understanding of other cultures and various racial groups.			
4	Studying literature helps me to obtain a bank of useful vocabulary			
5	Studying literature helps me to improve my writing and speaking skills			
6	Studying literature improves my reading skills through exposure to various literary genres.			
7	Studying literature enhances my thinking skills.			
8	Studying literature enriches my mind with many ideas and thoughts about life.			
9	Studying literature makes me think freely and independently.			
10	Studying literature helps me to express my views freely.			

DRAWBACKS OF STUDYING LITERATURE

Items	Statements	D	N	A
1	Studying literature makes me a bookworm.			
2	Studying literature conditions me to certain texts I am not interested in.			
3	Studying literature is just a waste of time and effort.			
4	There is a lack of jobs in the job market for literature majors.			
5	Literature tackles a lot of taboo issues which are harmful to me.			
6	Literature pollutes and corrupts students' minds by exposing them to foreign ideas which conflict with their customs, traditions and religion.			

Section 3:

Please read the following questions carefully and develop an answer:

1) In your opinion, what other benefits can students derive from studying literature at SQU?

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2) Can you think of any other disadvantages of studying literature?

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3) According to you, how can literature be given more value and encouraged as a major in Omani educational institutions?

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Thank you for your cooperation

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