

## Attitudes of Yemeni Students towards English Culture & Feminism

اتجاهات الطلبة اليمنيين نحو الثقافة الإنجليزية والحركة النسوية

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### Abstract

In the Yemeni context, English literature is believed to offer an opportunity for Yemeni students of English to be introduced to the culture English literature embodies. Yet Yemeni students may face some challenges when studying English literature as it holds sets of values and codes of morality different from their own. This study aimed at identifying Yemeni students' attitudes towards English culture through the following: (1) identifying Yemeni students' perceptions of their own culture, (2) identifying Yemeni students' perceptions of the target culture, viz, the foreign culture embedded in the English literary works, and (3) identifying Yemeni students' perceptions of feminism as feminism is originally a western movement. The study adopts the descriptive approach with its survey and analytical methods. To enhance the study, a questionnaire is distributed to 30 students in the English department, Faculty of Arts, University of Ibb, Yemen during the academic year (2018-19). These 30 students were purposefully chosen as a sample for the study. They were selected based on the results of their academic achievement in the previous two years. The questionnaire consisted of 16 items. It is divided into three parts so that every part gets sufficient reflection and analysis. The study has reached a number of results, the most important of which is: the attitudes of Yemeni students towards English culture in general were positive. The response to the alternative (agree) was 78%, while the alternative (disagree) got 14.8%, and the alternative (neutral) was 7.2%. Despite the positive results, it is concluded with an emphasis that students of English should embrace open-mindedness when engaging with intercultural discussions in order to be able to appreciate the English literary texts and bestride the culture difference. It is also concluded that bridging the culture gap can be achieved through narrowing the distance between students and the text by revising the current syllabus and incorporating texts that suit students' needs and meet the demands of the global world.

**Key words:** Yemeni students, English Literature, Feminism, culture, questionnaire, perceptions

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### ملخص البحث

القصدية، كما تم اختيارهم بناءً على نتائج تحصيلهم الأكاديمي في العامين الماضيين. وتوصلت الدراسة إلى عدد من النتائج أهمها: أن اتجاهات الطلبة اليمنيين تجاه الثقافة الإنجليزية بشكل عام كانت إيجابية، حيث بلغت نسبة الاستجابة على البديل (موافق) على (78%)، وبينما حصل البديل (غير موافق) على (14.8%)، والبديل (المحايد) على (7.2%). على الرغم من النتائج الإيجابية، فقد انتهى الأمر بالتشديد على أن طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية يجب أن يكونوا منفتحين عند الدخول في المناقشات بين الثقافات من أجل أن يكونوا قادرين على تقدير النصوص الأدبية الإنجليزية وتجاوز الاختلاف الثقافي. وخلصت الدراسة أيضاً إلى أن سد الفجوة الثقافية يمكن تحقيقه من خلال تضييق المسافة بين الطلبة والنص من خلال مراجعة المنهج الحالي الذي يدرسه الطلبة، ودمج النصوص التي تناسب احتياجات الطلبة وتفي بمتطلبات العالم المعاصر. الكلمات المفتاحية: الطلبة اليمنيين، الأدب الإنجليزي، الحركة النسوية، الثقافة، الاتجاهات

في السياق اليمني، يُعتقد أن الأدب الإنجليزي يوفر فرصة لطلبة اللغة الإنجليزية اليمنيين للتعرف على الثقافة التي يجسدها الأدب الإنجليزي. ومع ذلك، قد يواجه الطلبة اليمنيون بعض التحديات عند دراسة الأدب الإنجليزي؛ لأنه يحمل مجموعة من القيم والقواعد الأخلاقية التي تختلف عن تلك التي يمتلكونها. هدفت الدراسة الحالية إلى التعرف على اتجاهات الطلبة اليمنيين تجاه الثقافة الإنجليزية من خلال الآتي: (1) التعرف على اتجاهات الطلاب اليمنيين نحو ثقافتهم، (2) تحديد اتجاهات الطلبة اليمنيين للثقافة المستهدفة، أي الثقافة الأجنبية المضمنة في الأعمال الأدبية الإنجليزية، و(3) تحديد اتجاهات الطلبة اليمنيين نحو النظرية النسوية بوصفها في الأصل حركة غربية. لتحقيق أهداف الدراسة، استخدمت الدراسة المنهج الوصفي بأساليبه المسحية والتحليلية، حيث تم توزيع استبانة على (30) طالباً في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية الآداب، جامعة إب، اليمن خلال العام الدراسي (2018-2019). وقد تم اختيار هؤلاء الطلبة الثلاثين وفقاً لأسلوب المعاينة

## 1.1 Introduction

Literature should play a major role in teaching English language in Yemeni schools and universities. It begins at schools where students are either encouraged or discouraged to read and appreciate literature. It is almost always recommended that literary texts should be incorporated into English language classes for their connotative and figurative nature that creates a rich context that promotes discussion, self-expression and self-exploration (El-Helou, 2010). Literature, in fact, either in schools or universities is not given an adequate consideration from the authorities concerned. Fostering a culture of education through literature not only helps in facilitating language learning and acquisition, but will also boost students to engage in constructive cultural debates that would in return enhance their reflective and thinking capabilities. Marianne Boretz (1992) suggests:

In our view, it is the literary text that provides students with probably the richest source of verbal context. When students encounter a word in the literary work it is enriched in a complex of meaning-generating relationships (Boretz, 1992, p. 6).

It is believed that in order to get students appreciate literary texts, teachers should inspire their students to fall in love with words. There are many students, according to Rajihy (2013), “who pass the examination in literature courses... and get even good grades without reading the texts (p. 2). It is indeed the love of words that would encourage students to read and write; to converse and engage in discussion and analysis of texts inside and outside the classroom. Joseph Conrad believes that a writer’s great achievement lies in his special command over words. If this is the case with writing, reading also requires a special training regarding how words operate in texts:

My task which I am trying to achieve is by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see. That—and no more, and it is everything (Conrad, 2006, p. 1)

Students of literature understand that ideas are not ready in texts for readers to easily identify and extract. Rather meaning- making is the result of a process of interaction between the reader and the words on the page. The more critical efforts students exert in reading a text, the more the text keeps unfolding itself to them. By so doing reading literature becomes rewarding and improves creativity and critical thinking skills. Robert Frost delivered a lecture at Amherst College where he advocates the importance of incorporating poetry in education. For him education by

poetry is education by metaphor as metaphor enables students to discern subtle nuances and train eyes to figure out relationships and resemblances between objects. He also asserts that metaphor and poetry promote figurative thinking as well as cultivate aesthetic maturity. He states,

I have wanted in late years to go further and further in making metaphor the whole of thinking. How shall a man go through college without having been marked for taste and judgment? What will become of him? What will his end be? (Frost, 2007, p. 2).

To reiterate, literature equips students with significant analysis and reflection tools. It enables them to fathom the depths of a text, dismantle ambiguities and disparities and fill in the gaps and indeterminacies in a text. It also enables them to identify with characters and therefore, develop sympathy and empathy with other people in their actual lives. According to Zid (2015), studying literature makes students sympathize with other people and understand their pains and suffering” (p. 929). Literature also enables students to analyze and resolve conflicts of different kinds. Great poets and writers always deal with universal themes which have cosmopolitan appeal. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe believes that literature is a common property of all human beings. Indeed, literature is the song of the soul and writers are bound by the common bond of love and humanity to sing for life through thick and thin; delineating humanity’s aspirations and agonies without consideration to race, color or religion.

To reflect on the general status of English language in Yemen and the Arab World, the first conference on “The Problems of Teaching English Language and Literature at Arab Universities” took place in the University of Jordan in 1983. A number of distinguished papers were presented to streamline the problems and challenges that face students in the departments of English. Other papers suggest some ideas that can make studying English a worthwhile experience in the Arab universities. Zughoul (1983) for example, emphasizes the importance of including more language and linguistic courses as they enhance and improve language skills. Zughoul as a linguistic professor assumes that teaching English literature courses do not contribute in helping learners improve language skills or succeed academically nor enable them to secure good jobs. He adds that English literature conflicts with the Arab students’ culture as it offers different religious and social values.

Yemeni students joining English departments cope with a number of challenges concerning the understanding and appreciation of literary texts. That is in part due

to the lack of enough exposure to authentic literary texts. Traditionally, very few poems or short stories are prescribed to school students in order to introduce them to literature. Yet, school teachers are not motivated enough to expect them to exert any considerable influence on students' reception and appreciation of literary texts. In his study, "English literature teaching in Yemen: problems and prospects", Prasad (2004) reflects on the English literature in Yemen. He remarks that "The students in schools have been exposed to some literary pieces in English. When they come to college, they are too weak to adjust to the demands of the syllabus of the department of English" (Prasad, 2004).

In Yemen, there have been numerous papers presented at various seminars and conferences locally dealing with challenges and prospects of teaching and learning English language and literature at the university level. In Yemen, three conferences on English language and Literature at major Yemeni universities were held at Sana'a, Ibb and Hodeida universities (Al-Maqtri, 2011, p. 5). A number of papers were presented reflecting on the status of English departments at Yemeni universities, the problems that the students encounter and the traditional methodologies and practices of teaching language and literature. Other papers discussed the usefulness of using literature in learning English language while some "critical voices were heard questioning the rationale behind the literature courses" (Al-Maqtri, 2011, p. 5). Thakur (2002) and Bose (2004) conducted important studies on the curriculum used in the English Departments in the Yemeni universities. They found out that the whole curriculum material does not qualify students to have a good command of English.

Another significant study was conducted by Prasad (2004) on English literature teaching in Yemen. Dr. Prasad discusses the difficulties facing Yemeni learners in acquiring English. He believes that students at the first and second years of their study are taught the major English skills and they are expected to have a sound foundation of the English language in order to cope with the literature courses later but unfortunately their lack of proficiency in the language makes learning literature courses a bit difficult to deal with (Prasad, 2004). In his study (2003), "Literature and Language Study: a Classroom-centred Study", Sharyan remarks that Yemeni students join departments of English to acquire language. Therefore, the courses must be oriented to meet students' needs and requirements. Al-Maqtri (2004) in his paper entitled "Is it Language or Literature" seems to agree with Sharyan (2003) that the main objective of students is to learn the language. So he holds that literature courses are irrelevant to the teaching of the language. However,

Rajihy (2013) conducted a survey on the controversy over teaching English language: those who support the incorporation of language courses only and those who advocate teaching literature courses. He concludes that literature is also beneficial in teaching the language. Students during literature classes improve their writing, listening, thinking and speaking skills as they interact positively with the teacher especially if the text selected appeals to the students.

Based on the foregoing, the current study seeks to answer the following main question: "What are Yemeni students' attitudes towards English culture?" This will be undertaken by answering the following sub-questions:

- i. What are Yemeni students' perceptions of their own culture?
- ii. What are Yemeni students' perceptions of the target culture?
- iii. What are Yemeni students' perceptions of feminism?

## 1.2 Objectives

Generally, this study aimed at identifying Yemeni students' attitudes towards English culture through the following: (1) identifying Yemeni students' perceptions of their own culture, (2) identifying Yemeni students' perceptions of the target culture, viz, the foreign culture embedded in the English literary works, and (3) identifying Yemeni students' perceptions of feminism.

### 2.1 Feminist Consciousness and Culture:

Western feminist theory emerged from three historical waves emphasizing women's equality, empowerment and representation. The first wave extends from 1830-1900 advocating women's right to education as well as the right to vote. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Mary Wollstonecraft (2007) contends that men are not intellectually superior to women; the difference only depends on the amount of education each receives. Society seems to favour men over women, so society will not prosper unless women are better treated and receive the same quality education that men receive. She is of the opinion that women should not be treated as less equal than men because all men are created equal and once women are given their freedom to release their full potential, they will vie with men at various walks of life for the betterment and welfare of society itself (Wollstonecraft, 2007). The second wave extends from 1960- 1980 emphasizing gender equality, focussing on work, family, sexuality and reproductive rights. Betty Friedan (1963) in *The Feminine Mystique* argues that a woman's identity should not be measured by her commitment to her household and family. She says that women should aspire

beyond having a handsome husband, a beautiful house and cute children. She says, “I want something *more than my husband* and my children and my *house*” (1963, p. 32). The third wave started in 1990s which was a continuation of the first and second waves. The third wave maintains that unlike sex which is biological, gender roles are socially constructed. In her book, *The Second Sex*, Simone De Beauvoir (2009) writes, “Man is defined as a human being and woman as a female – whenever she behaves as a human being she is said to imitate the male (p. 85).

In Yemen, Islam has a huge influence on shaping feminist thought and gender roles. Muslim women consider Islam to be a feminist religion that actually gives women equality, inheritance and other rights that honor them as human beings; yet Islamic teachings are often misinterpreted. Hashim (1999) defines Islamic feminism as rights given to women which are “stated in a source considered to be divine, and consequently much harder to refute” (p. 9). That’s, women rights have been decreed by Islam which are based on the interpretation of the Quran. This interpretation has been subject to numerous interpretations and reinterpretations across time and any discrimination against women ought not to be ascribed to the Quran but to the misinterpretation of the patriarchal clergy. Hamdan (2006) asserts that Islam promotes gender equality and encourages female education; it is Arab cultural traditions that contradict the Quranic teachings and annul the gender consciousness.

In fact, some Yemeni female teachers and activists have understood their roles very well in creating feminist consciousness by raising awareness on discriminatory practices against women. They constantly remind their fellow women about the greatness of their female ancestors. Yemeni women are proud of themselves as inheritors of a great feminist heritage as they are the descendents of two great ruling queens, Queen Sheba and Queen Arwa. There is no need for them to look up to any external model to follow suit as they have a rich history where women reached the highest position that any man has ever achieved. In a journal article, Assa’d and Onassis (2012) remark, “For the 1st time in centuries Yemeni women are remembering that they are all Queen Sheba’s daughter, that in their blood it is the strength of a nation which is flowing” (Assa’d, 2012). According to Rachelle Fawcette (2013), a researcher in Islamic Studies, sexism in particular is not a barrier for Yemeni women; their sole obstacles to success and self-accomplishment are illiteracy and poverty. Once a woman gets over them, she has no difficulty establishing herself as man’s equal (Fawcette, 2013). In terms of education, the most common barriers faced by Arab women are: culture, family obligation, gender role, household chores and finances (Rabadi, 2013). Despite all that, there are, in our contemporary times, a number of Yemeni women who have succeeded to prove

themselves at the social and political levels. The Peace Prize Winner, Tawakol Karman, for instance, has achieved an international fame as a leading human rights activist. Karman is also known for her vital role in the Youth Revolution of what was then called The Arab Spring that took place in 2011.

Moreover, Nawal El.Sadawi (1980), a well-known Arab feminist writer and critic, advocates gender equality and progressive education and attacks the Arab education system and its politics which has not done any significant steps to promote gender consciousness among female and male students. She contends:

Many of the regimes in the Arab countries are still very far from being progressive...The content of educational curricula has remained rigid, unimaginative, and incapable of responding to the needs of the children and adolescents growing up in a fast-changing society. Here again the attempt is to breed conformist, confused, and obedient citizens to ensure that they will not become agents of change (1980, p. 189)

Yemeni university female students are intelligent and they show a strong desire to learn and improve themselves. Universities receiving female students from different parts of the country are supposed to play a role in raising the awareness of the female students regarding their rights and encourage them to be self-confident and to voice their opinions without fear; to pursue their higher education, and have a successful life of their own making. It is also the role of educators to encourage female students and help to make the classroom as a site of empowerment (Reiko, 2014). English teachers in this regard can approve of their female students' choice of English language as a major because learning English introduces students to different cultures and gives them a wider access to knowledge and intellectual pursuits. AlKhader (2005) as quoted in Zid (2015) attests to my previous statement that English "contributes in developing a new self with a fresh outlook towards others, enriches students' experiences and adds to their repertoire of knowledge" (2015, p. 928).

## 2.2 Current Status of English Language at Yemeni Universities

Hundreds of Yemeni students are joining English departments every year owing to the importance of English as lingua franca. Since literature subjects constitute at least 50% out of the general syllabi of English studies, this research undertakes to explore the attitudes of students towards the foreign culture embedded in English



literary texts and whether English literature helps students expand their consciousness of common humanistic values and feminism.

English literature courses offered in the department of English, faculty of Arts, university of Ibb constitute 50% of the total number of the courses beside linguistics, translation and other requirement courses. In the third year, where students start to have grown awareness regarding the importance of literary texts, five literature subjects are included out of 12 in the two semesters. In the fourth year, there are four literature subjects in the first semester and four subjects in the second semester. The following table shows the number of literature courses included in the curriculum of the department of English, Faculty of Arts, Ibb University:

**Table 1.** Literature Courses for 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year students, Dept. of English, Faculty of Arts, Ibb

Level	Literature subjects	Level	Literature subjects
<b>Level II Semester 1</b>	1. Language thro. Lit.	<b>Level II Semester II</b>	1. Modern Prose
	2. Introduction to Lit.		2. History of English Lit.
<b>Level III Semester I</b>	1. Elizabethan Drama		<b>Level III Semester II</b>
	2. Metaphysical Poetry	1. Restoration Drama	
	3. Literary Criticism	2. 18 <sup>th</sup> c Novel	
<b>Level IV Semester I</b>	1. Comparative Literature	<b>Level IV Semester II</b>	1. 20 <sup>th</sup> c. Poetry
	2. 19 <sup>th</sup> c. Poetry		2. 20 <sup>th</sup> c. Novel
	3. 19 <sup>th</sup> c. Novel		3. 20 <sup>th</sup> C Drama
	4. 19 <sup>th</sup> c. Drama		4. Advanced Composition

### 3. Methodology

This study adopts the descriptive approach with its survey and analytical methods. To enhance the study, a questionnaire is distributed to 30 students of English. These 30 students were purposefully chosen as a sample for the study. They were selected based on the results of their academic achievement in the previous two years i.e. they are the most capable and skilled students in the English language compared to their colleagues. The study involved 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> students of English. Fifteen students were chosen from level three and the other fifteen were chosen from level four.

The questionnaire consisted of 16 items. It is divided into three parts so that every part gets sufficient reflection and analysis; the first part of the questionnaire deals with the Yemeni students' perceptions of their own culture; the second part of the questionnaire deals with Yemeni students' perceptions towards the target culture. The third part of the questionnaire deals with the Yemeni students' perceptions of feminism. The questionnaire was submitted to thirty students in the English department, Faculty of Arts, University of Ibb, Yemen during the academic year 2018-19.

#### 4. Results and Discussion:

To answer the general question of this study, which states: "*what are Yemeni students' attitudes towards English culture?*" frequencies and percentages of each item of questionnaire were calculated in each of the three alternatives (agree, neutral, disagree). Then the iterations of each of the three alternatives (agree, neutral, disagree) were summed and divided by the total number of iterations in each field in order to obtain the general percentage for each field. Table (2) shows the percentages of Yemeni respondents towards English culture.

**Table 2**

#### **Response of Yemeni students towards English culture**

No.	Fields	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
1	Students perceptions of their culture	89.6%	4.4%	6%
2	Students perceptions of target culture (English)	75%	10.2%	14.8%
3	Students perceptions of feminism	69.4%	7%	23.6%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>78%</b>	<b>7.2%</b>	<b>14.8%</b>

The previous table shows that the attitudes of Yemeni students towards English culture in general were positive as the response to the alternative (agree) was 78%, the alternative (disagree) was 14.8%, and the alternative (neutral) was 7.2%.

This general result of the study indicates the positive attitudes of Yemeni students towards English culture through which go in line with the findings of a number of a number of previous studies. Advocators of the inclusion of literature in the language teaching have convincingly revealed numerous reasons as to why literature courses should be incorporated. Among the studies that claim that literature is beneficial, a study by Salih (1986) which surveyed 118 Arab students majoring in English. The study asserts that literary texts provide a rich and authentic written material where students believe that they can practice all their language skills effectively (Salih, 1986). This is supported by another study conducted by Obeidat

(1997) entitled "Language vs. Literature: in English Departments in the Arab World." In this study, Obeidat agrees with Salih with regards to the fact that literature improves the students' linguistic and cognitive abilities especially creative writing and critical thinking. He also believes that literature provides students with a wide variety of language skills as well as exposes them to real and authentic texts that can help them communicate properly and effectively in real life situations. He adds that literature is crucial for "honing the students' open-mindedness as they are frequently exposed to foreign cultures and foreign peoples (Obeidat, 1997, p. 8). Likewise, Zid (2015) conducted a study entitled "Arab Students' Perspectives on the Value of Literature" in which he investigated the value of literature among Omani students. The study reveals that Arab students still enjoy literature courses and hold that literature is important as it enriches their vocabulary and fosters their communicative and intercultural competence. He specifically states, "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"(2015, p. 930).

As indicated so far, opinions and attitudes vary as to how more of linguistic or literature courses would be incorporated into the curriculum in the English departments and whether literature or linguistics enhances students' language competence. Haggan (1999) conducted a study at Kuwait University to gauge students' attitudes and reactions towards linguistic and literature courses. The researcher concludes that the department should design an appropriate curriculum to suit the needs and interests of the students themselves. Likewise, Lee (1995) asserts that "a careful and wise selection of materials focused on learners is a must if we want a positive response from them"(p. 325).

To answer the first sub-question of this study, which states: "*what are Yemeni students' perceptions towards their cultural backgrounds?*" frequencies and percentages of each item of questionnaire were calculated in each of the three alternatives (agree, neutral, disagree). Then the iterations of each of the three alternatives (agree, neutral, disagree) were summed and divided by the total number of iterations in each item in order to obtain the general percentage for each field. Table (3) shows the percentages of Yemeni respondents towards their culture.

**Table 3****Response of Yemeni Students towards their culture**

No.	Items	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
1	For Yemeni students, religion always comes first	100%	0%	0%
2	Yemeni students keep strong ties with their families	98%	2%	0%
3	Literature requires a good command of language that's why students' performance in literature courses is poor	100%	0%	0%
4	The syllabus conditions students to certain texts they are not interested in	70%	13%	17%
5	New texts from various other cultures written in English should be incorporated into the syllabus	80%	7%	13%
<b>Total</b>		<b>89.6%</b>	<b>4.4%</b>	<b>6%</b>

The previous table shows that the attitudes of Yemeni students towards their culture in general were positive where the response to the alternative (agree) was 89.6%, the alternative (disagree) was 6%, and the alternative (neutral) was 4.4%.

From the responses, the students seem to unanimously agree on three issues: religion, family and language proficiency. The respondents hold a high regard for their religion and for their families especially female respondents. All respondents also confirm that English literature requires a good command of the language in order to comprehend literary texts and appreciate their literary merits. The fourth question reflects students' dissatisfaction the current courses offered; 17% of them agreed to the current courses offered and the rest were neutral. For the last question, the majority agreed that new texts should be included in the syllabi; 13% disagreed, while the rest were not aware.

As it is shown in the table above, religion seems to influence students' perceptions of the foreign culture. Students also have strong communal and familial connection which makes them fail to identify with a major theme in English literature which is individualism and non-conformity. Unlike collectivist culture, individualistic culture emphasizes self-reliance, autonomy, and personal goals. Besides, students agree that their low English proficiency constitutes a challenge for them in terms of appreciating the foreign culture. The majority of students seem also to complain about the outdated syllabus which adds to their frustration. Therefore, new texts from various cultures, especially some Arabic texts in English, are highly

suggested to be incorporated so as to motivate students to receive and appreciate literary texts better.

It has been conventionally believed that texts included in the syllabus must yield ethical and moral lessons. Students also are taught to elicit the moral lessons whenever they read a text. Texts that do not render moral lessons are mostly ignored. A large number of Yemeni students display strong religious affiliation. They are so sensitive to any issue that differs from their religious teachings. Any controversial issue may affect their reception and appreciation of the literary text and directs the course of discussion in the classroom in general. To illustrate, in a Comparative Literature class, a professor was drawing a comparison between Charles Dickens and Naguib Mahfouz. He said that Naquib Mahfouz is a well-known Egyptian novelist who is also a Nobel laureate of literature. One of the students interrupted him saying that Naguib Mahfouz only received Nobel Prize because he wrote against Islam and he should not be taught to students because of his heretical views. The student's remark provoked the teacher and made him leave the class.

According to the majority of Yemeni people the role of education is to enhance social traditions and ideals. The university's major role is to spread awareness regarding the Yemeni moral ethics and religious values. To give another example, an Indian professor was dismissed from Ibb University, Yemen, fifteen years ago because he let his students watch William Congreve's *The Way of The World* inside the classroom. Later on, some of the students spread a rumor among their friends and through Friday preachers that the university is propagating western ideas amidst the university students. I personally heard one preacher say loudly, "our university becomes a place that attacks our morals and propagates western values. We shall not keep quiet." When I later talked to one of the students who attended that class, he told me that the students were provoked by the conversation that takes place between Lady Wishfort and Sir Willful Witwoud especially by the following excerpt:

To drink is a Christian diversion,  
 Unknown to the Turk or the Persian.  
 Let Mahometan fools  
 Live by heathenish rules,  
 And be damned over tea-cups and coffee.  
 But let British lads sing,  
 Crown a health to the King,  
 And a fig for your Sultan and Sophy (Congreve, 2006, p. 170).

It is hypothesized that the culture problems encountering Yemeni students of English literature pose some challenges in teaching and learning English literary texts and that some texts deal with issues that conflict with students' traditional and religious beliefs. Zid (2015) found out in his study that one of the disadvantages of studying literature according to Omani students is that "literature raises taboo issues that conflict with students' religion and traditions" (p. 931). Like other Arab students, Yemeni students value texts that yield moral lessons or texts that consolidate and match their code of ethics. Professors are well aware of this and hence they avoid prescribing or recommending English texts that posit cultural conflicts. This is not of course a valid and viable solution to this existing problem that we cut our ties with western literature and culture "in the name of compatibility of values," or that we should "teach only what has immediate relevance and bears reference to Arab and Moslem experiences" (AlMaleh, 2005, p. 672). On the contrary, I think I agree with AlMaleh that texts should not be judged and evaluated according to their moral or immoral contents or according to students' likes or dislikes. They should be judged and appreciated according to their aesthetic and artistic merits. Foreign language students of the 21st century ought to realize that in order to build meaningful relations with people from various backgrounds they must be equipped with a special set of skills particularly tolerance and intercultural competence. Oscar Wilde (1980) in his Preface to "The Picture of Dorian Gray" rightly says, "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are either well written, or badly written. That is all" (Wilde, 1890, p. 1).

To answer the second sub-question of this study, which states: "*what are Yemeni students' perceptions of the target culture?*" frequencies and percentages of each item of questionnaire were calculated in each of the three alternatives (agree, neutral, disagree). Then the iterations of each of the three alternatives (agree, neutral, disagree) were summed and divided by the total number of iterations in each item in order to obtain the general percentage for each field. Table (4) shows the percentages of Yemeni respondents towards the target culture.

**Table 4****Response of Yemeni students towards the target culture**

No.	Items	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
1	English literature enhances students' understanding of other cultures and encourage open-mindedness	80%	11%	9%
2	Teachers discuss all the technical and thematic aspects of texts freely	75%	14%	11%
3	English Literature has a positive influence on students' perceptions of freedom and independence	75%	10%	15%
4	Students should be taught texts that are alien to their culture	75%	12%	13%
5	Language and culture are absolutely inseparable	80%	4%	16%
6	Teachers encourage students to engage in intercultural debates that help narrow down the culture gap	65%	10%	25%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>75%</b>	<b>10.2%</b>	<b>14.8%</b>

The previous table shows that the attitudes of Yemeni students towards the target culture in general were positive where the response to the alternative (agree) was 75%, the alternative (disagree) was 14.8%, and the alternative (neutral) was 10.2%.

In response to whether English literature enhances their understanding of other cultures, 80% agreed; 9% disagreed, while the rest were neutral. The other question whether teachers discuss texts freely inside the classroom, 75% agreed; 11% disagreed and the rest were neutral. To the third question, 75% agreed; 14% disagreed and the other 11% were neutral. The next question about students appreciating texts that are alien to their culture, 13% disagreed; 75% agreed and the rest were neutral. The fifth question addressed the relationship between culture and language. The majority agreed; 16% of the respondents disagreed and 4% were neutral. For the last question, the majority agreed; 25% of the respondents disagreed, while the rest constitutes 10%.

As the above table shows, it appears that despite the existence of some cultural challenges, one can see determination and willingness from the part of students to overcome any cultural differences. Students expect their teachers to play a positive role in enhancing their understanding and appreciation of the target culture by encouraging open-mindedness and intercultural debates. Students do not object to be

taught texts that are alien to their culture and seem to believe that intercultural debates contribute in narrowing down the culture gap. Students also hold that language and culture are interlinked so intercultural competence cannot be attained without immersing oneself in the target culture which language reflects. Besides, it seems that English literature adds to students' notions of freedom and self-independence.

In fact, language and culture cannot be separated from one another because they are tightly interlinked. Kramersch (1993) gives culture a very important place in teaching a foreign language because "meaning cannot be fully grasped without cultural awareness" (Byram, 2003, p. 30). Therefore, teachers of the target language must realize that texts are multilayered and more complex than they seem, and depending solely on stylistic analysis will not encourage students to engage in serious discussions in the classroom. Buttjis (1990) states, "The degree of acculturation determines the language learners' competence, and without acculturation language competence will be incomplete (p. 53).

To reiterate, it is the role of teachers inside classrooms to encourage open-mindedness and condemn the view that holds that there are superior and inferior cultures. They should rather enkindle students' interest in the target culture, and suggest ways as to how cultures have more similarities between them than differences. By stimulating such an interest in the target culture, students will become more interested in going beyond their parochialism and learn about other cultures based on facts not just stereotypes. Aggarwal (2011) as quoted in Gowinda (2017) says, "Students need to reflect upon intercultural competences and intercultural learning that can be gained through overcoming ethnocentrism and increasing the sophistication in dealing with cultural difference" (p. 2).

Furthermore, students joining departments of English should be encouraged to adopt self-reliance and open-mindedness to cope with the new culture embedded within the language they target to acquire. This ensures a positive interaction with texts and makes their learning experience so interesting and fruitful. However, some conservative students either male or female often show some resistance towards learning English culture. They assume that a foreign culture can influence their own culture and so they want to learn only the language as if language could be separated from its culture. As a matter of fact, to achieve fluency in the target language, one ought to master communicative competence and enhance it with intercultural competence (Atay, 2009, p. 123). Intercultural competence requires the students to have cultural awareness of the target language. Students in order to communicate



properly in intercultural contexts should be enlightened as to how everyday language contains unconscious cultural cues and practices.

To answer the last sub-question of this study, which states: "*what are Yemeni students' perceptions towards feminism consciousness?*" frequencies and percentages of each item of questionnaire were calculated in each of the three alternatives (agree, neutral, disagree). Then the iterations of each of the three alternatives (agree, neutral, disagree) were summed and divided by the total number of iterations in each item in order to obtain the general percentage for each field. Table (5) shows the percentages of Yemeni respondents towards feminism consciousness.

**Table 5**

**Response of Yemeni students towards feminism**

No.	Items	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
1	Women in Yemen enjoy equal rights just like men	60%	2%	38%
2	Exposure to Western culture influences students' perception of gender consciousness	67%	10%	23%
3	Teachers encourage students especially female students to engage in feminist and intercultural debates that help narrow down the culture gap	80%	3%	17%
4	Co-education in the University helps students learn better and encourages cooperation between female and male students	70%	10%	20%
5	Feminist consciousness expands students' awareness of self and the other and help in narrowing down the culture gap	70%	10%	20%
<b>Total</b>		<b>69.4%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>23.6%</b>

The previous table shows that the attitudes of Yemeni students towards feminism consciousness in general were positive; where the response to the alternative (agree) was 69.4%, the alternative (disagree) was 23.6%, and the alternative (neutral) was 7%.

The first question whether women in Yemen enjoy equal rights with men, 60% agreed; 38% disagreed while the rest were neutral. In answering the next question, 67% of the respondents agreed that exposure to western culture influenced their perception of gender consciousness; 23% disagreed and the rest were neutral. The third question whether teachers encourage female students to read and participate effectively, the majority agreed; 17% disagreed while only 3% of the students were neutral. The fourth question whether co-education helps students learn better, 70%

agreed; 20% disagreed, and the rest were neutral. The final question asserts that feminist consciousness plays a major role in raising students' awareness of the self and the other. 70% of respondents agreed; while 20% of the respondents disagreed and 10% of respondents were neutral.

As we can see from the table above, it is revealed that English literature seems to exert a positive impact on students' perception of gender roles. University also seems to act as a site of women's empowerment as o-education is perceived to contribute in raising gender consciousness. Female students feel encouraged to participate effectively in curricular activities and in intercultural debates which gives them 'a room of their own' to voice and express themselves as effectively as their male counterparts. By so doing, female students' awareness of their role in society increases as well as their self-confidence. Male students also when seeing their female counterparts engage effectively in debates and other curricular activities, their consciousness of femininity and feminine beauty in particular expands and their socially long held beliefs of gender roles are to be reconsidered.

Frankly speaking, women in Yemen are often mistreated and considered to be inferior to men. Discrimination against women does not come from culture alone but also from political and legal institutions that do not vouch for women's civil rights. Illiteracy, child marriages and honor killings are Yemeni feminists' major obsession and constant strife to abolish. Thus, promoting gender consciousness of equality and political rights are so vital for progress and social well-being. In order for society to fly with its two wings, there needs to be a continuous affirmation of gender equality. In Yemen, women have tried to prove themselves capable in the workforce in particular and public sphere in general. Feminization and urbanization have escalated the growth of women's consciousness as to how they can establish themselves as equal to men as well as prove themselves worthy of consideration at the various social, economic and political fronts. According to Amartya Sen (1999) women play a vital role in bringing about a change in political, economic and social arenas: "Women are increasingly seen as active agents of change: the dynamic promoters of social transformations that can alter the lives of both men and women" (1999, p. 189).

To facilitate interaction among male and female students, teachers should include some feminist texts and gender related topics in their classes in order to encourage broadmindedness, independent thinking, initiative and tolerance (El-Sadawi, p. 189). Through group works, students learn cooperation, appreciate one another participation and value the voices of their counterparts. Teachers also should observe

their reactions and encourage female students to “discover their own voices and express themselves in English” (Reiko, 2014, p. 6). For teachers it is important to always renew/develop new and appealing teaching approaches to raise awareness as well as to hone students’ skills to be able to cope with the rapidly changing world; a world that requires students to always foster intercultural and interpersonal competencies. To reiterate, incorporating gender issues into already existing classes, teachers can create a lively and interesting atmosphere for students to actively and positively engage in critical reflection.

## 5. Findings:

The study discovered that there are a number of challenges that prevent students from enjoying and appreciating the foreign culture. Lack of identification with characters and certain themes depicted in the target texts beside religion, low-English proficiency and the current status of the syllabi constitute the major challenges for Yemeni students of English. Regarding the syllabus, students are limited to certain texts prescribed by the Department that renders students less motivated. Examples of the currently prescribed texts and authors included in the curriculum are: *Macbeth, Twelfth Night, The Merchant of Venice, Hamlet, Dr. Faustus, She Stoops to Conquer, The Rivals, The Way of the World, Robinson Crusoe, Pride and Prejudice, A Passage to India* and *Great Expectations* in addition to the poetry of Andrew Marvel, John Donne, Emily Dickenson, William Wordsworth, Lord Alfred Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, T.S. Eliot, W.H Auden, Ezra Pound and Sylvia Plath. This finding confirms with Zid (2015) who considers it as a disadvantage. He remarks, “One of the disadvantages, according to respondents, is that it contains old, classical texts that students find hard to absorb (2015, p. 931). Therefore, offering numerous texts beside or as an alternative to these canonical texts, students could have better and wider views about English male and female characters. In the same vein, a previous study conducted by Al-Maqtri (2011) regarding the importance of reconsidering the syllabi of the English department. He concludes that students “preferred modern literature written in modern language than old literature (p. 10), and recommends that “literature teachers choose the literary forms and texts that are enjoyed by their learners” (11).

The study refuted the fact that language can be studied in isolation from its culture. Language and culture are inseparable and therefore, students should be exposed to the target culture no matter how different it is to the students’ own culture. It is also discovered that students trust that their teachers play a major role in facilitating learning for them as well as helping them understand and appreciate the target culture by selecting the suitable and appealing texts. Despite the cultural

difference, it is found out that students have no reservations to study the target culture. It is evident also that English culture embedded in the English literary texts has a positive role on students as it expands their awareness of the self, the other as well as the gender roles. Students strongly believe that intercultural debates help in narrowing the culture gap. Furthermore, the study discovered that Yemeni female students are not so disadvantaged as both sexes seem to enjoy almost equitable learning opportunities. The University acts as a site for the empowerment of women as co-education provides a suitable environment for both sexes to interact and understand one another. Teachers play a major role in encouraging feminist and intercultural debates among students so as to hone students' skills to be able to cope with the rapidly changing world; a world that requires students to always foster intercultural and interpersonal competencies. Besides, by incorporating feminist issues, teachers can create a lively and interesting atmosphere for students to actively and positively engage in critical reflection. Both female and male students engaging in intellectual discussions reinforces gender equality and helps dismantle the socially constructed notion of *feminine physical beauty*. Surely, such discussions veer the attention towards female intellectual beauty, open the eyes to "the nameless grace" and make the "unseen power" be seen and bid one fall in love with "the pilgrim soul". It is also discovered that feminist consciousness plays a major role in raising the students' awareness of themselves and the other and of course will help them open up to the target culture and thus reduce to some extent the culture gap.

## 6. Conclusion

Our lives have been reshaped if not transformed by the globalization process. We are no longer just national citizens but also global citizens (Lerche 1998). So it seems to be mandatory for educators to cope with the new changes and prepare their students to take part in this new world that requires students to always foster intercultural and interpersonal skills; otherwise they will keep lagging behind. In fact, the main function of education is to support students to learn and discover their identities and become better citizens of the world. This shift of focus in the perception of the world and English language learning entails a change in awareness and in both learning and teaching process. A student, therefore, should be equipped with intercultural proficiency that enables him/her to act as a cultural mediator to see the world through the other's eye, to "cross frontiers, and become a specialist in the transit of cultural property and symbolic values" (Byram, 1997, p. 11).

It is also concluded that teachers of English are very careful when choosing English literary texts. They purposefully tend to focus on the linguistic aspects rather than the cultural aspects of the texts for fear that the foreign text might clash with

students' cultural background. It is true that the Western literature challenges our dominant ideologies, encourages free love, develops sensitivity to gender and social inequalities, and encourages non-conformity; yet teachers should not be discouraged; rather, they should encourage students to rise above their parochialism and embrace universal values by promoting intercultural and communicative competences. Obeidat (1997) suggests that the competent teachers should not avoid teaching texts which pose cultural controversy, rather they should "help students better understand foreign peoples and their respective cultures in an age filled with a massive influx of knowledge and education" (1997, p. 7). In a word, to make studying English literature a worthwhile experience, students should be encouraged to approach English texts freely and interpret texts without concerns to moral, social or religious considerations (Al-Maleh 2005). In addition, Islam as a global faith promotes gender equality, sees no difference between men and women and encourages them alike to seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave and always urges them to explore and develop new ideas in order to cope with all the changes that take place around them.

The results of the study also revealed that narrowing down the distance between students and the texts by enriching the syllabi with variety of texts that students can identify with will make students enjoy the texts and appreciate their literary merits. It is also concluded that the role of the teachers to wisely introduce students to the target culture by selecting simple and interesting texts that appeal to them as well as by promoting the importance of reading. With time, reading will enable them to overcome the language learning barriers and this will result in enhancing their self confidence and of course will encourage them to participate in class discussions effectively. By suggesting extra-curricular reading activities such as short poems, short fiction, feminist texts and also some didactic movies, teachers surely will help broaden the students' intellectual horizons and raise female consciousness which in turn will reduce the culture gap to a great extent.

The study recommends that the current syllabi adopted by the English department at Ibb University be improved by giving a wide range of texts including Arab writers in English, feminist texts and texts from World Literature beside British and American literatures. Therefore, students may discover an area or identify with certain texts or authors and therefore expand their horizon of thinking and probably develop a liking for reading literature independently. Students should be exposed to western culture as a way to expand their perspectives about self, others, and the world they live in especially those who seek to travel around the world. Not only this, but it

helps students develop tolerance and put their own ideas and beliefs in a broader context.

Finally, close reading of texts develops critical and cognitive thinking yet it is ignored by many teachers who mostly follow the historical approach (Bose, 2004). The culture gap I think to pose a real challenge if texts are studied critically and comparatively especially postmodern texts, i.e. texts after 1960s which further studies will like to investigate. Another study to investigate the views and perceptions of teachers of English literature at the English department is suggested.

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