



Teaching, Inspiring, and Enriching: The Role of Studying Literature in Enhancing the Sense of Belonging and the Pride in the Arab National Identity among Young People

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the role of studying literature in enhancing the values of belonging and promoting the sense of pride in the Arab national identity among young people. Literary texts have the power to deepen the national sense inside young men and women, urging them to love their homeland, adhere to their national identity, and feel proud of belonging to their nation. Throughout their literary works, writers address the youth everywhere, promoting their sense of home and raising their national consciousness. This can, for example, be seen in the major works written in both English Literature and Arabic Literature. In English Literature, for example, writers such as James Joyce, Gregory Burke, Robert Browning, and Maya Angelou place the theme of national identity at the heart of their works. In Arabic Literature, likewise, enhancing the sense of belonging and pride in national identity is a central topic in the literary works of Arab writers such as Nagib Mahfouz, Leila Buck, Mahmoud Darwish, Mustafa Balilah, and Suad Al-Sabah. The researchers reached the conclusion that the works written by these writers in both English Literature and Arabic Literature enhance young people's sense of belonging and pride in their national identity.

Keywords: Arabic literature, English literature, belonging, pride, national identity, young people.



Introduction

Among its many functions, literature opens a window for young people to love their homeland and enhance its national value in their hearts and minds. Accordingly, literature enables these young men and women to feel attached to their motherland and proud of their national identity. In a widely changing world in which values are continuously changing, young people need to stick to the roots of their home and keep the noble principles it promotes. They need to develop a sense of belonging to their land, the shelter that intellectually protects them from immoderate thoughts and stubborn views. Thus, studying the topic of the role of literature in enhancing the values of belonging and national identity among young people is of great importance as it provides these young men and women in the whole world in general, and in the Arab world in particular, with the opportunity to love their homeland and feel proud of their national identity.

Literature Review

In *Nationalism and Literature: The Politics and Culture in Canada and the United States*, Sarah Corse (1997) highlights the relationship between literary discourses and the national identity. The author refers to Aldous Huxley's famous speech in which the eminent writer and philosopher states that "nations are to a very large extent invented by their poets and novelists" (as cited in Corse, 1997, p. 7). This means that the literary texts written by poets, novelists, and dramatists have a great influence on forming the national identity of people, particularly those students who study the works of literature.

According to Nawel Ouhiba (2022), "Literature is the mirror of society; this will effectively help the learners to find or create a relation between the literary text and real-life experiences" (p. 479). This means that literary texts teach students how to benefit from the real-life experiences they read about, inspire them with new insights into behaving in life, and enrich their knowledge and thinking. Furthermore, the topics they study in poetry, drama, and novel, particularly those that reveal the love of the land and the pride in one's national identity, contribute to the formation of their national consciousness and promote their sense of belonging to their home. Accordingly, they become enthusiastic to do their duty towards their motherland and become good models for participating in the processes of development and prosperity in their countries.

In her article "Drama as an Instrument for National Identity Formation," Christine Ojemudia (2013) indicates how literature, particularly drama and theatre, helps young people to form their national identity. Through studying literary texts, these young men and women, Ojemudia (2013) points out, "are introduced to characters they have never met, places they have never visited, and ideas that may or may not have ever crossed their minds" (p. 36). For Ojemudia (2013), national identity is closely related to one's personal identity as well as to one's sense of belonging to home:



National identity often goes with national pride and defines a person's identity and sense of belonging to his/her nation. This sense of belonging is usually shared with a group of people who have affinity to the same place. National identity is not an inborn trait, rather it is a direct result of the presence of elements from the shared activities, practices and other common factors in people's daily lives such as national symbols, language, colours, history, culture and consciousness; as well as ethnic bonding, music, food, arts, craft and so on. (p. 39)

Köroğlu and Elban (2020) go further, asserting that texts, literary ones included, not only "change, shape, and affect the formation" of students' national identity that makes them love their own nation, but they also help these students develop a sense of "global identity" through which they feel their duty towards the globe and humanity in general (p. 55). In this sense, students feel they belong to an entire world and understand that they have a role to play. Therefore, they become keen to make their own contributions that help "create a more peaceful world by supporting international cooperation and social development" (Köroğlu and Elban, 2020, p. 56).

Drawing on the present studies that have been conducted on the issue of literature and its role in enhancing the values of belonging and national identity among young people, the researchers have found that not too many studies, according to their knowledge, have been wholly devoted to showing how literature addresses the youth with the purpose to promote their national principles and strengthen their sense of belonging and national identity, particularly in the Arab world. Through their study of various literary works written in English and Arabic by writers such as the Irish novelist James Joyce, the Scottish playwright Gregory Burke, the English poet Robert Browning, the African-American poet Maya Angelou, the Egyptian novelist Nagib Mahfouz, the Lebanese playwright Leila Buck, the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, the Saudi poet Mustafa Balilah, the Kuwaiti poet Suad Alsabah, and many others, the researchers have discovered that the literary works written by these authors directly address young people everywhere, enhancing their sense of belonging to their homeland, and increasing their love and pride in their national identity.

The objectives of the present study can be summed up as follows:

1. Enhancing the values of belonging among young people, especially in the Arab world.
2. Raising young people's awareness of their national identity.
3. Providing parents with an insight into how to emphasize the importance of belonging to one's homeland among their sons and daughters.
4. Drawing attention to the problems that hinder the national development of young people in society.
5. Protecting young people from conflicting views by reinforcing their national feelings.

**Discussion:*****Literature and Enhancing the Sense of Belonging and National Identity******English Literature***

In his novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the famous Irish writer James Joyce describes how the young man Stephen Dedalus, the protagonist of the book, adopts a sense of belonging to Ireland, his homeland which he dreams of seeing as successful, prosperous, and, more importantly, independent. Throughout the novel, Joyce portrays Ireland's determination to construct an identity for itself simply because it is the national identity that creates a strong bond between the nation and its own people, particularly young men and women, instilling in them the love of home and the enthusiasm to have an influential role in forming the future of their nation. Young people always have innovative ideas, creative insights, and untraditional solutions for the problems that hinder the settlement and development of their countries. This is what Joyce attempts to reveal in the novel. According to the protagonist, Ireland will only be a top country if it can assert its national identity and eliminate what threatens this identity, namely British domination. For Stephen,

This feeling can only be translated into independence of Ireland when the people thwart the authority of the British Empire as colonial masters as well as reject their own version of Ireland as a pre-colonial rural utopia (...). This (...) marks Stephen's place in the new generation of Irishmen who will construct a true national identity for the independent Ireland. (Sharma, 2020, pp. 196-7)

In this way, young people firmly stick to their national identity and feel proud that they have been part of its formation.

Drama and theatre play an essential role in enhancing the national feeling of the audience and promoting their love for their nation. For example, the theatre in Scotland actively engaged with forming a distinctive Scottish identity that reflected the values and aspirations of people. According to Steve Wilmer (2009), the National Theatre of Scotland presented a series of national events that asserted the Scottish identity. To reflect their national spirit, those events were interestingly given "the title 'Home'" (Wilmer, 2009, p. 80). Following those theatrical presentations, the National theatre of Scotland produced and presented a large number of dramatic productions. Notable among those staged productions was *Black Watch*, a play written by the Scottish dramatist Gregory Burke. The play asserts Scottish identity and promotes people's national pride in their homeland. The Scots were powerfully attracted to such dramatic works which embodied their national aspirations and therefore

brought into Scotland's theatres thousands of her people who had never entered them before. Once the floodgates were open, the Scots, hungry to reassert their shared cultural identity in a public arena, returned again and again to see their



national heroes and heroines portrayed in authentic Scottish settings by Scottish actors with Scottish accents. (as cited in Sledzinska, 2018, p. 41)

Among all genres of literature, poetry is the most popular means of expressing national identity and depicting belonging to one's homeland. For instance, nationhood and longing for home are central topics in Robert Browning's 'Home-Thoughts, from Abroad'. In this poem, Browning, a leading English poet, expresses his love for England, his country, and shows how he missed each detail of his adored home, especially when he was abroad in Italy. Browning (1887) writes,

Oh, to be in England,
Now that April's there,
And whoever wakes in England
Sees, some morning, unaware,
That the lowest boughs and the brushwood sheaf
Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf,
While the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough In England - now! (p. 13)

Away from his native country, the poet feels homesick, indicating how he longs for his home. He remembers his motherland and the beauty of every part of it. While he thinks of his motherland, a springtime scene jumps into his memory, reminding him of the charming nature in England where birds delightfully sing and flowers wonderfully bloom, painting a charming portrait of the English landscape. The poet's love of his homeland increases daily; even if he is far away, he can never forget his beautiful country. This patriotic feeling and love of home enhance the speaker's sense of belonging to his country and reveal his pride in his national identity.

Adherence to national identity provides the person with empowerment, confidence, and self-assurance. This meaning is embodied in the writings of the African-American writer and poet Maya Angelou who always expresses her pride in her African roots. Though she suffered a lot due to oppression and racial discrimination practiced against black people in America, the poet could overcome the difficulties she encountered by declaring her pride in her black national identity. In her poem entitled 'Still I Rise', Angelou (1994) proudly states,

I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise



I rise

I rise. (p. 164)

As the lines reveal, the poet compares herself to a vast 'black ocean' that can strongly rise and swell, carrying the tide in an impressive, powerful way. This sense of empowerment and determination is one of the 'gifts' she inherited from her forefathers, whose sacrifice and endurance of the various hardships could create a noble meaning of the black identity they transmitted to their younger generations. As a representative of these younger generations, Angelou feels proud to describe herself as the embodiment of the dreams and hopes of blacks everywhere. Finally, she gratefully honours "the ancestors for the sacrifices they had made so that their descendants could flourish" (Luesink, 2019, p. 100). Thus, clinging to our nation's roots and the national identity created by our ancestors provides a powerful national feeling that helps us 'rise' up and overcome all the difficulties that may hinder our way to success and self-assertion. This is the universal message that Angelou's 'Still I Rise' conveys to young people everywhere.

Arabic Literature

In fiction, Arab writers highlight the sense of belonging and the pride in national identity among Arab people, particularly young men and women. For example,

Egypt's writers have realized that any traditional representational forms would be considered, in the 'national' and 'cultural' contexts, insufficient and that there must be supplementation from other creative channels, especially fiction (...) which has contributed to national discourse. (Samarrai, 2010, p. 18)

One of those writers, the well-known novelist Naguib Mahfouz who was the first Arab writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988, deals with the idea of nationalism in many of his novels. "In an address to the Swedish Academy delivered on his behalf on 10 December 1988," writes Fatma Mousa-Mahmoud (1989), "Mahfouz, who is personally a very modest man, proudly asserted his position as (...) an Egyptian Arab and heir to a seven thousand year-old civilization. (p. 154). Obviously, Mahfouz's international speech reflects the great writer's pride in his national identity and asserts his sense of belonging to the Arab nation. This Egyptian Arab Nobel Prize laureate was not just a novelist, but more than that, "a man of vision committed to reclaiming the rich heritage of Egypt, of every inch of it," to quote Samarrai (2010) who describes Mahfouz's national 'commitment' as follows:

This commitment, I have to state, was not a political devotion or a cultural trait absorbed as the writer matured; it developed in him from the time he was seven years old, when he experienced an early meaning of nationalist feeling. (p. 16)

Significant among Mahfouz's fictional works dealing with the theme of nationalism is *The Cairo Trilogy* which includes the three novels *Palace Walk*, *Palace of Desire*,



and *Sugar Street*. Sabry Hafez describes this book as "a multi-standard narrative which records the socio-political transformation of modern Egypt in its quest for national identity," indicating how the Nobel Prize laureate distinctively weaves his *Cairo Trilogy* in a beautiful way through which "he mirrors the present in the past in order to enable the nation to draw support and guidance from its own history" (as cited in Sofia, 2017, pp. 5-6). Commenting on the national component of *The Cairo Trilogy*, Ghanim Samarrai (2010), explaining how the work reflects Mahfouz's "sense of belonging," writes:

In itself, Mahfouz's insightful reflection on the events that dominated the modern Egyptian scene contributed to showing the vitality of a nation engaged in a process of remaking and reframing the national identity. Examining the main focuses of the work reveals the man's choices, which should be taken in the context of his vision as a true Egyptian, proud of his Egyptness (p. 21).

Throughout his *Cairo Trilogy*, Mahfouz indicates how the Egyptian people were fascinatingly able to overcome the hardships they encountered during the various phases of their modern history, particularly those periods of political instability that imposed many challenges on people's social life. However, due to their inner strength and national spirit, the Egyptian people could find their way and shape a distinctive reality for themselves. The book is not only a significant literary work that contributed to constructing the Arab national identity in general, but it also stands as a source of inspiration for the Egyptian and Arab youth, urging them to stick to their national history and know about the patriotism of their ancestors. Accordingly, young people all over the Arab world are motivated to assert their Arab identity and play their role in achieving the hopes and aspirations of their nation.

In drama and theatre, Arab playwrights also enhance young people's sense of belonging and national identity. For instance, the Lebanese dramatist Leila Buck indicates in her plays how she feels connected to her homeland and proud of her family, people, and identity. This national feeling is clearly revealed in Buck's play entitled *ISite* in which national identity is a central theme. In the play, the playwright shows how her Lebanese grandmother, who had to travel to the United States due to the civil war in Lebanon, "is always proud of her Arab identity so much to the extent that she tries willfully to do mistakes in pronouncing the English language letters and replace them with Arabic letters" (Abdel Dayem, 2019, pp. 248-9). Here, the grandmother gives us an example of how we become proud of our origin, identity, and home. . In her article "'How Do We Belong?': The Perspective of 'Home' in Leila Buck's *ISite*," Marwa Mohammed (2020) points out how Buck, throughout the play, portrays home as that safe shelter that signifies one's "attachment and sense of belonging" (p. 318). Our motherland is what shapes our existence, character, and national identity. This is what Bucks asserts in the play:



That's what home is I guess—where you make contact with the earth. And every time I touch down in (...) soil –I see myself -- for the first time. (as cited in Abdel Dayem, 2019, p. 248)

The assertion of national identity and the pride in belonging to the Arab nation come at the heart of Arabic poetry. This can be observed in the poems written by the widely known Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish who proudly made his homeland a central theme in his poetry. Perhaps 'Identity Card' or 'Bitaqat Huwiyya', from the *Leaves of Olives* collection is Darwish's most expressive poem about national identity. In the poem, he declares his pride to be an Arab from top to bottom. Addressing an Israeli officer who has asked him to show his identity card, Darwish (2013) confidently states,

Write it down
I'm an Arab
And my identity card number is 50000
(...)
My roots were planted before time was born
Before history began
Before the cypress and the olive trees
Before grass sprouted. (pp. 47-48).

As the lines indicate, the poet speaks in a confident and powerful voice that reflects his strong Arab identity and reveals the pride in his roots which, the speaker of the lines affirms, had existed 'before time was born' and 'before history began'. Darwish's Arabic roots are profoundly "entrenched into the land, into its pines and fields," Eman Mukattash (2016) writes, asserting that nothing and none "can ever uproot him, not even being given "a name without a title" by the Israeli government" (p. 18).

Darwish's pursuit for identity is so comprehensive that it exceeds his Palestinian and Arab sense of belonging. Khalil Nofal (2017) observes,

Darwish uses his poetry to quest and express his sense of identity throughout various phases as a Palestinian, as an Arab, and as a human. As a Palestinian and as an Arab, he depicts his sense of Palestinian and Arab identity as belonging to homeland. He portrays this sense as homeland, language, culture, traditions, values, history, geography, roots, and environment because all Arabs share the (...) common language, the same culture, the same traditions, values, and heritage, the same roots, the same culture, the same history and geography. (p. 76).

As a human, Darwish asserts in the poems he writes his quest for a broader human identity that highlights the value of human co-existence and gathers all humans in one shared world characterized by love, peace, and tolerance. These noble meanings and



great values are expressed in *A State of Siege*, a poem in which Darwish speaks to an Israeli guard, pointing out the shared commonalities between them as human beings. The poet writes,

You might find there's
an accidental likeness between you and me:
you have a mother,
I have another
We have one rain and one moon.
(as cited in Alhawamdeh, 2022, p. 164)

Nationalism is also evident in the poetry of Mustafa Balilah, a leading Saudi poet who is known for his patriotic writings. In his poem entitled 'My Beloved Homeland', the poet expresses his love and pride in his motherland, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Yahya Dahāmi (2022) describes the poem as "one of the most deeply ingrained pieces of Saudi literature, both in the minds of Arabs and Saudis" (p. 279). The poem expressively reveals the speaker's admiration of his home and pride in his identity as a Saudi, an Arab, and a Muslim. As Dahāmi (2022) puts it,

Mustafa Balilah's poem has introduced and revealed that it carries feelings of love, respect, pride, and admiration for the homeland (...). 'My Beloved Homeland' serves as an emblem of love, joy, and belonging on the occasions of national poets and their celebrations of achievements at all levels in a great nation like the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The lyrical poem's true patriotic lyrics and lovely melody have made it eternal since its inception. (p. 285).

Like Darwish and Balilah, the Kuwaiti poet Suad Al-Sabah proudly asserts her pride in her Arab identity, showing in her poetry that her soul is nurtured by her sense of belonging to her Arab nation. In her poem 'My Body is a Palm that grows on Bahr al-Arab', from the *Fragments of a Woman* collection, Al-Sabah (1995) proudly wonders:

Can I ever be anything but an Arab?
My body is a palm tree fed by the waters of Bahr al-Arab,
And my soul reflects all the errors, all the sorrows,
All the hopes of the Arabs. (p. 204).

Proud of her Arab ancestors who gave an amazing example of challenge, determination, and heroism, Al-Sabah (1995) goes on in her poem, announcing that her great Arab 'forefathers'

explored the waves, the sea,
And the music of the wind.
They befriended death and tirelessly pursued their dreams,
With horse and sword,



With never a moment's repose. (p. 188)

These lines reveal the poet's solid national voice that impressively expresses her pride to be an Arab whose forebears have always been a source of admiration, respect, and esteem. Interestingly, the poems written by Al-Sabah, as can be noted in the one discussed above, depict her Arab people's thoughts and feelings, reflecting 'all the errors, all the sorrows, and 'all the hopes of the Arabs'. As the Egyptian writer and critic Samir Sarhan (1995) puts it, Al-Sabah's poetry reveals "both the aspirations and disillusionments of an Arab mind concerned with...national issues and intent on forging a way ahead for Arab men and women" (p. 5).

Conclusion

This paper explored how the study of literature enhances young people's sense of belonging to their motherland and invites them to feel proud of their national identity. Through the example of English and Arabic literary works presented throughout the paper, a message is conveyed, not only to the Arab youth but to young men and women everywhere, urging them to adhere to and be proud of their national identity. Realizing this supreme meaning, young people can trust themselves and their national heritage. Consequently, they become able to reshape the future of their world by positively contributing to the processes of peace and development in their countries. To conclude, literature develops the national feeling of young people, providing them with an insight into how to promote a sense of love and belonging to their homeland.

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