The Challenging Task of Teaching Classical Poetry Inspired from Divine Texts: Case of Milton's "Paradise Lost" and Sacred texts.

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Received: 29/5/ 2025 Accepted: 31/5/ 2025 Published 11/6/ 2025

Abstract:

The present article highlights the challenge of teaching English literature inspired from divine texts. It is also a literary analysis and a reflection on *Paradise Lost*, John Milton's masterpiece. This English epic rewrites the Universal Story of the creation of Adam and Eve in addition to Satan's envy and temptations, leading to the original sin and fall of mankind. This story, present in the Bible and in the Quran, was rewritten by Milton with special aesthetic and poetic effects that made of it a classic, that is still today generating many inquiries in literary criticism. What inspired Milton to write his great Epic are not human texts, but sacred texts. Critics have always acknowledged the Bible as the source of Milton, but they scarcely, if ever, talk about the Quran's influence. In this article, we will use two passages from Milton's Epic to demonstrate that the Bible was not the only source of Milton, but that there is a direct influence of the Quran, many translated versions of Quran were available during his lifetime. We will also explain how teaching such texts as *Paradise Lost* in an EFL class is truly an enriching experience, but a much demanding task too.

Key words:

Teaching literature; Milton's Paradise Lost, the Quran's influence, the Bible, the translated versions of the Quran.

ملخص:

المقال الذي نحن بصدده يسلط الضوء على التحدي الذي يواجهه اساتذة اللغة الانجليزية في تدريس الادب الانجليزي المستوحى من النصوص الاهية كما هو الحال مع ملحمة الفردوسالمفقودللشاعرالانجليزي جون ميلتون وهوكذالك تحليل ادبي لهذه الملحمة التي تعيدكتابة القصة العالمية عن خلق آدم وحواء وغيرةالشيطان وحسده، وكذا سقوط البشرية بعد الخطيئة الأولى. هذه القصة الموجودة في الإنجيل وفي القرآن ايضا، أعاد ميلتون كتابتها بتأثيرات جمالية وشاعرية جعلتها ملحمة عالمية، لا تزال تولد العديد من الاستفسارات في النقد الأدبي الحديث. مصدرالهام ميلتون لكتابة ملحمته ليس نصوصًا بشرية، بل نصوصا مقدسة. بينما يتم الاعتراف دائمًا بان الانجيل هو مصدر ميلتون لكتابة ملحمته لا يُقال سوى القليل عن تأثير القرآن. في هذه المقالة سنستخدم مقطعين من ملحمة ميلتون لإثبات أن الانجيل ليس المصدرالوحيد لملتون، ولكن هناك تأثير مباشر للقرآن أيضًا. في الاخيرسنبين ان تدريس مثل هذه النصوص الادبية وان. . الا انه يتطلب الكثيرمن الجهد كان تجربة فريدة وممتعة

الكلمات المفتاحية:

تدريس الادب، الفردوسُ المفقود لميلتون، تأثير القرآن، ترجمات القران، الإنجيل.

1. Introduction

Teaching literature inspired from divine texts is not an easy task, since it requires a specific approach, and knowledge regarding different theologies. It requires also a specific knowledge regarding the different theories of intertextuality. Influence and literary connections are inevitable; since writers read, and are influenced by what they read. In our case, what inspired Milton to write his great epic are not human texts, but sacred texts.

Reading and teaching some passages from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, made us realize that there is more than the Bible as an inspiration for Milton in writing his Epic. In this article, we suggest the analysis of two extracts from Milton's Paradise Lost to defend the thesis that there is a direct influence of Quran on Milton's conception of Eve's creation from Adam's rib, and the jealousy of Satan from the couple and his envy. We suggest that Milton is familiar with the translated versions of the Quran during his lifetime.

2. Rewriting and intertextuality:

This article relies on concepts borrowed from three different literary critics who emphasize the connectedness of one text with previous texts. The notion of intertextuality coined by the Bulgarian French philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristiva is the presence of one text into another; Kristiva (1969) thinks that the text has three dimensions: the subject; the reader; and the former texts; and that those three are in continuous dialogue to produce sense. For Gerard Genette (1982) intertextuality is the effective presence of one text into another. He argues: "For my part, I define it, no doubt in a more restrictive sense, as a relationship of co-presence of one text between two texts or among several texts. That is to say, as the actual presence of one text within another, in its most explicit and literal form, it is the traditional practice of quoting". Newman and Dobinsky (1997 : P. 2). Roland Barth (1977), before Kristiva and Genette, has described the text as being woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages antecedent or contemporary (160).

Hence, we clearly see that no body writes exnihilo. All literary texts are somehow interrelated, present in one another, quoted or referred to in other texts. In many instances, works of literature, like Milton's great epic, are often influenced by divine texts. Reading *Paradise Lost* reveals the presence of more than one divine text namely the holy books of: Christianity and Islam.

3. Milton and 'Paradise Lost'

Zulfiqar (2022) argues that John Milton (1608_1674) was first an Armenian , a sixteenth century soteriological sect of Protestant Christianity,

but at his death he left a manuscript on Christian doctrine, not discovered and published until 1825, which showed that he had become a Socinian/Unitarian. Milton's *Paradise lost*, the greatest Epic in English literature, contains more than 10,500 lines written in blank verse. The epic is a narration of the creation of the first human Adam and his consort Eve. It shows the envy of Satan from the couple and his whispers to Eve whom he tempts to eat from the forbidden tree. Milton initiated it in 1658 and finished it in 1663. It was, first published in 1667 in ten books, after Cromwell's death. Milton wrote it during and after the Civil Wars in England, which witnessed the execution of King Charles I, and the rise of the first and only republican government in the history of England. This government was led by Oliver Cromwell, the Republic was short lived, and Charles II restored the thrown and the monarchy.

Considered Milton's major work. It is a universal classic translated to many languages, including an Arabic translation of Muhammad Anani (1982) as: "الفردوس المفقود ملحمة الشاعر الإنجليزي جون ملتون", which has been criticised as 'infusing Paradise lost with Quranic diction' as Einboden (2009) put it. He argues that much of the twentieth century scholarship has been concerned with Milton's unorthodox theology, and in particular his repudiation of Trinitarianism. Zulfiqar (2022) too argues that as a Unitarian and Antitrinitarian, Milton repeatedly insisted on the numerical oneness of God almighty. Milton clarified that internal worship means the acknowledgement of the one true God and devout affection for him.

Tobias Gregory (2006) said that Milton was ranked as the most knowlegable modern epic poet in theology and religion (p.178). The Egyptian Islam Issa (2017) also said that Milton was a multilingual intellectual. He explains that Milton has very likely read the first lating translation of the Quran which was Published in the 12th Century. Some critics went so far as to make of Milton a devout Muslim like the case of **Louis Awad**, the Egyptian literary critic (Quoted in Issa 2017: page 3).

Hence, the reception of Milton and his *Paradise Lost* in the Arab-Muslim World varies between appropriating Milton and rejecting him. It is worth noting here that the common scriptural ground found in both Christianity and Islam, regarding the universal story of the creation of Adam and Eve and the temptation of Satan, is what justifies those judgments.

In Europe, most of the reception of Milton tends to demonstrate that in 'Paradise Lost' the poet wanted to justify the ways of God to humans, Rebeiro (2003) argues that *Paradise Lost*, is a text of strong persuasive intention. He clarifies that the first invocation of the poem asserts the supremacy of God over humans and suggests that God's power is invincible and highlighting the disobedience of the first two human beings (P.192).

Certain English critiques and poets criticized the way Milton described Satan emphazing his rebellion making of him the real protagonist of *Paradise Lost*. William Blake, for instance, ironically declares that Milton wrote more about Satan and Demons than about the Creator and the angels (P. 2).

4. The First Attempts of Translation of the Holy Quran in Europe

The first translation of the Quran in Europe can be traced to 1143. After that Latin edition, the Eupeans translated the Quran to many other Western languages. In the seventeenth century, people were curious about Islam, and they were eager to know more and more about this religion. The French Du Ryer was the first to attempt a translation. The French version's title was 'L'Alcoran de Mahomet' (1647) and was presented to European readers. According to Hamilton & Richard (2004): "Du Ryer had to present his work (…) as having been composed for the benefit of the missionaries in the Levant" (P.?).

Alexander Ross translated the *Quran* from Du Ryer's French translation into English in 1649 in London. Ross has added commentaries to his translation *The Alcoran of Mahomet*. The commentaries serve as a preface, which he put under the title 'The Translator to the Christian Reader'. Comparing and contrasting passages from the bible and the *Quran* proved necessary for us to make the point, that Milton was, at least, familiar with the translated version of the *Quran*, which appeared the same year Cromwell appointed him Secretary for Foreign Tongues.

Teaching literary texts

To begin with teaching as a job is hard enough because it involves the teacher's own worldview, his existential beliefs and convictions, and the sum of his long-life experiences. Teaching literary texts from other cultures, which remain a too demanding intercultural enterprise. Elaine Showalter (2003) quotes Berube's reflection on the Art of teaching: 'Teaching is really hard to do... [Inevitably], students will find out not only what you think about x or y, but also what you are like, in some strange and intimate way' (page.3). It is really challenging to teach literature? and it becomes a much harder task if it is inspired from divine texts.

Widdowson, one of the proponents of integrating literature in classes of English as a foreign language, asserts that literature, and poetry more specifically, has a way of exploiting resources in a language which has not been codified as a correct usage (162). Hence, Widdowson like many other researchers questioned the traditional way of teaching literature, with the

confines of a structural approach that emphasizes correctness of form, while neglecting the individual emotional responses to the literary texts.

The second approach, which is the reader response approach, is more welcomed by teachers of literature, since it allows the reader to respond freely to the text. The text, in this case becomes a space where both writers and readers negociate meaning. Thus, this approach allows the students more freedom and flexibility, and encourages them to express themselves freely, regarding different genres of literature : Poetry, fiction, or Drama. Ultimately; it develops students' critical thinking and cultural awareness. Each literary genre has its characteristics and it determines which approach, and specific techniques to use.

Within the last decades, ways of teaching literature are progressively developing, allowing the use and implementation of new teaching approaches in the literature classroom. Carter and Long (1991) introduced three main models of teaching literature (1) the language model (2) the cultural model and (3) the personal growth model.

Recently, a more holistic approach to literature is advocated. It is the integrated model to teach literature that is a linguistic approach that integrates linguistic description with the interpretation of the text. Ultimately, the objective of any teacher of literature is to enable students to analyze, then to interpret the literary text.

5. Teaching Extracts from Milton's Paradise Lost

Teaching some extracts of Milton's *Paradise lost* proved a very enriching experience, however it required efforts. First, the language itself is not Modern English, but rather a form known as early medieval English that the English writers used from the late 12th century to the 1470s. The second concerns the minor differences between Christian and Islamic versions of the story of creation.

The first passage to illustrate is about the creation of Eve from Adam's rib, which we can find in book 8 of *Paradise Lost*, from verse number 460 to 470. The second passage is about Satan's jealousy and envy of Adam and Eve which we can find in Book 4: from verse number (505 to 535). Moreover, we will compare the late passage to Satan's rebellious words to God, in the Quran in Chapter of Sade (ص صورة). First passage reads :

460 Mine eyes he closed, but open left the cell

Of fancy, my internal sight, by which,

Abstract as in a trance, methought I saw,

Though sleeping, where I lay, and saw the shape

Still glorious before whom awake I stood;

465 Who, stooping, opened my left side, and took

From thence a rib, with cordial spirits warm,

and life-blood streaming fresh; wide was the wound,

but suddenly with flesh filled up and healed;

The rib he formed and fashioned with his hands;

470 Under his forming hands a creature grew,

Events narrated in the preceding verses can be found in King James Bible, a version that Milton read. Below is an extract from Genesis 2:21-22:

- **21** And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof;
- **22** And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man.

The story figures in **the Quran** too: Chapter of Anissa: the title of the chapter means 'WOMEN' first verse. Here is an English translation of the first verse from Arabic:

'O humanity! Be mindful of your Lord Who created you from a single soul, and from it He created its mate, and through both He spread countless men and women. And be mindful of Allah—in Whose Name you appeal to one another—and ˹honour˺ family ties. Surely, Allah is ever Watchful over you. (Chapter Anissa (women): VERSE 1)

" يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ ٱتَّقُواْ رَبَّكُمُ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَكُم مِّن نَّفْسٍ وَٰحِدَةٍ وَخَلَقَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا وَبَثَّ مِنْهُمَا رِجَالًا كَثِيرًا " وَنِسَآءً ۚ وَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ ٱلَّذِى تَسَآءَلُونَ بِهِۦ وَٱلْأَرْحَامَ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ كَانَ عَلَيْكُمْ رَقِيبًا ١

(سورة النساء. الاية 1)

While there is no direct reference to the rib in the Quranic verse, the sayings or tradition of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) further reveal that God created Eve from Adam's rib.

The other passages from Milton's Epic to be illustrated, are those where:
-Satan was contemplating Adam and Eve, and his jealousy and envy were at the highest pic (p.127).
-where he decides to search the **Garden of Eden** for more knowledge on the **Forbidden tree** (ibid).
-Where he swears to ruin them and their offspring, exactly as he has sworn in the Quran (p. 128). Below are passages from Paradise Lost, which we will follow by an extract from the Quran to draw a comparison between the passages and the verses from the Quran. The first passage reads:

505'Sight hateful, sight tormenting! Thus these two,

Imparadised in one another's arms,

The happier Eden, shall enjoy their fill

Of bliss on bliss, while I to hell am thrust,

510 Where neither joy nor love, but fierce desire (p.127).

Milton then presents us with a passage where he demonstrates that Satan was not only envious; but he thinks about the best way to tempte the couple in tasting the forbidden tree and to make of them transgressors as well. The passage reads:

512Yet let me not forget what I have gained

From their own mouths; all is not theirs; it seems:

One fatal tree there stands, of knowledge called,

515 Forbidden them to taste: knowledge forbidden?

Suspicious, reasonless: Why should their Lord

Envy them that? Can it be sin to know,

Can it be death? And do they only stand

By ignorance, is that their happy state,

The proof of their obedience and their faith?

O fair foundation laid whereon to build

522 Their ruin! Hence; I will excite their minds (p.127).

In the following passage, Milton then leads us into the mind of the malefic and envious creature who thinks he has to walk the garden of Eden to find more and more knowledge about the forbidden tree. His ultimate aim is to tempt Eve and use her as the instrument to persuade Adam and make them both damned as he is. Milton makes Satan's tone threatening in the three last verses where he promises them the end of all pleasures and the bigining of misery. The passage reads:

530 A chance but chance may lead where I may meet

Some wandering spirit of heaven, by fountain-side,

Or in thick shade retired, from him to draw

What further would be learned. Live while ye may,

Yet happy pair; enjoy, till I return,

535 Short pleasures; for long woes are to succeed.' (p.128).

When we read the above passage, it reminds us with the many instances in the Quran where Satan promises God to tempt, deviate and ruin humans with his whispers (*I will excite their minds*).

While the Bible speaks of Satan as a fallen Angel, Islamic exegetes like Ibn Kathir, for instance, say he was never an angel, but he belongs to the Jinn, that God created from another matter that is fire. In chapter *Sade* (صورة ص), the Surah (chapter of Quran) takes its name from the alphabetic letter *Sade* with which it begins. In the Quran from verse 75 to verse 85, we read first that God created Satan from fire, and then we read how he swears to God to tempt and ruin humans. Here is an English translation of the Quran:

Allah asked, "O Iblîs! What prevented you from prostrating to what I created with My Own Hands? Did you ˹just˺ become proud? Or have you always been arrogant?"

He replied, "I am better than he is: You created me from fire and him from clay."

Allah commanded, "Then get out of Paradise, for you are truly cursed. And surely upon you is my condemnation until the Day of Judgment."

Satan appealed, "My Lord! Then delay my end until the Day of their resurrection."

Allah said, "You will be delayed until the appointed Day."

Satan said, "By Your Glory! I will certainly mislead them all, except your chosen servants among them."

(Chapter Sade: verses 75 to 83).

Conclusion

To be or not to be original is highly subjectivre in our era; Connections are everywhere, influence is inevitable, and intertextuality is a form of rewriting, all of these melt in one pot that is literature, which is itself a whole world. The story of the creation remains the most attractive, and most read of all stories, present in the celestial books with many similarities and minor differences. Rewritten by Milton, who gave it its emotional and poetic appeal and made of it an Epic that stands among the highly ranked classics of all time.

Teaching this kind of texts, which have the celecial books as a source, in a literature class remains a delicate task for EFL teachers, since it presupposes delving in theological studies and comparing religions and drawing lines of connections between different religions of the book. When Muslim students read ‘Paradise Lost’, they inevitably think of the Quran verses, because the story figures in many chapters and verses of the Quran. When Christian students read it, they automatically think of the Bible, since the story figures in Genesis too. That is enough evidence of the common ground between the religions of the book. It also demonstrates that the multilingual and multicultural poet Milton forcibly could have read different versions of the bible, and the translated versions of the Quran available for him in the 17th century.

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