

CHALLENGES IN TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH FICTION: INSIGHTS FROM UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AT A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

The current study has investigated students' preferences to literary texts in an undergraduate literature course at a public sector university in Pakistan. Guided by reader-response theory, this study's data was supplied by 52 participants. Firstly, anonymous and voluntary feedback was collected from 52 undergraduate students of English Literature. Secondly, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 participants. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that students' personal life experiences play a significant role in determining their preference for novels in their curriculum. Most students based their preference of novels on their own moral code so much so that they disliked novels that did not fit their moral standards suggesting that they should be removed from the curriculum. These results are important for curriculum designers and researchers of literature.

Keywords: *students' preferences, curriculum, English literature, Higher Education, fiction.*

1. INTRODUCTION

This study discusses through students' perceptions the effect of curriculum choices on students' response to literary texts in an undergraduate literature course at a public sector university in Pakistan. The researchers aimed to explore how teachers' and advisory boards' decisions to choose certain novels affect students. It is fair to expect that students will take more interest in texts that they enjoy and none in the ones they do not. So, we explored students' perceptions regarding which novels were preferred and why. The research question explored in this study was, "What are students' perceptions regarding the novels selected in English literature curriculum at a public sector university in Pakistan?"

The information for this study was gathered from a final-year literature class at a public university in Pakistan where the socio-cultural backgrounds of

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the students are diverse. Students from rural origins have stricter family structures and closely adhere to religious values, in contrast to those from metropolitan ones (Lloyd et al., 2005). As a result, they do not tolerate any form of flexibility with regard to religion or their moral and ethical principles. Additionally, students in public sector institutions are not exposed to these venues where their critical thinking abilities could be further developed (Andrabi et al., 2002). Since students come from diverse private and public schools and colleges as well as from rural or urban social backgrounds, their educational backgrounds and talents vary. These sociocultural obstacles prevent Pakistani universities from fostering student autonomy (Hameed & Hameed, 2016; Yasmin & Sohail, 2018). Additionally, huge classes are used for teaching and learning at public colleges.

Curriculum for English Literature Programs nationally is designed by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) Pakistan. Firstly, the National Curriculum Revision Committee (NCRC) prepares the draft on the basis of its worth and critical acclaim that is further approved by the University Academic Council and Board of Studies of the department. Lastly, the final draft is prepared after the incorporation of recommendations from the stakeholders (HEC, 2017). In the 4-years Bachelors' (BS) degree program in English Literature, students get exposed to socially, culturally, and philosophically different literary texts. The students are reading for an undergraduate degree in English Literature and are studying 15 novels as part of their curriculum in three courses: Fiction, American Literature, and World Literature (list attached as Table 1).

1.1 Research Questions

1. What are students' perceptions regarding the novels selected in English literature curriculum at a public sector university in Pakistan?
2. What are the factors that affect students' perceptions regarding the novels selected in English literature curriculum at a public sector university in Pakistan?

1.2 Research Objectives

1. To explore students' perceptions regarding the novels selected in English literature curriculum at a public sector university in Pakistan.
2. To explore the factors that affect students' perceptions regarding the novels selected in English literature curriculum at a public sector university in Pakistan?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the current study connects literature with students' choices and literary preferences, our theoretical underpinnings are based on Rosenblatt's (1938/1970, 1978/1994) reader-response theory. According to Rosenblatt (1978/1994), any literary text's meaning can be found both within it and in the reader's interaction with it, where the reader and the text work together to interpret the text. She explains that the process of creating meaning involves the reader directly. Flynn (2007) concurs with the notion that literary texts only have meaning to the reader. In order for readers to establish their preferences for literature, both this literary transaction and their literary connections are crucial.

The way readers create their own meaning by incorporating their moral and contextual values as well as the teacher's effect on the transaction process has an impact on their choices (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994). Readers prefer texts where they can easily identify with themselves or their societal values. Students resist the texts that seem to threaten their moral values and identities (Beard, 2001). Rahman and Weda's (2018) study explored students' perceptions in appreciating English works. The responses reflected that literature presents social and moral values and helps build perceptions regarding potential moral and ethical issues. Hence while designing a curriculum; consideration should also be given to moral sensitivities (Stotsky, 1991).

There is a considerable debate in the literature regarding the importance of ethics in determining the value of a literary work (e.g. Winston, 1999; Posner, 1997; Nussbaum, 1994). It is possible that students might find a work attractive and appealing due to its moral qualities. Carr (2005) reflects that students incline more towards the texts that offer serious implications for moral education. The study further adds that readers, through emotional engagement, absorb moral and ethical values as literary texts call readers' moral and other prejudices into question, inviting them to re-evaluate their established emotional responses from other normative perspectives. Choo (2017) argues that literature should be taught primarily for its cosmopolitan ethical impact on the students whereas others like Gearon (2019) and Nussbaum (1994) argue that literature can have many possible ways of reading including, but not limited to, the ethical. Posner (1997), in his article against ethical criticism, claims morality should be no judge of literature as works like *Lolita* are well-acclaimed because of their aesthetic value despite being immoral by many standards.

Even though critics debate whether or not literature should be judged for its ethical value, the reviewed literature suggests that experts have

suggested that moral and cultural values be considered while designing curriculum. Cox (1991) points out that various texts can have different kinds of effects on students and has suggested a few guidelines about criteria for book selection. He advocates literature that stimulates the development of personal responses and cognitive growth among learners. Crocco (2004) studies how fiction actually affects students at moral and social levels. She favors readers' exposure to similar socio-cultural content so that they can be engaged in meaningful discourse and can assume an active role in the meaning-making process. Researchers also highlight that multicultural texts sometimes lead to serious conflicts. Such texts sometimes reinforce stereotypes rather than engaging students in democratic practices (e.g. Stotsky, 1991). Such attention to diversity is crucial if we want to achieve a balance in the curriculum. Stotsky (1991) also recommends a few guidelines for the selection of multicultural texts where the major principles of inclusiveness and the avoidance of stereotype formation need to be reflected on. Fang et al. (1999) also highlight that selection of multicultural literature for children needs consideration where socio-cultural and political perspectives should be considered for fostering students' understanding of the historical and '*material forces underpinning the construction of cultural identities*' (p. 270).

Many research studies have explored how an understanding of literature is affected by readers' moral, cultural and social sensibilities. In 2013's study, Skarstein investigated secondary school students' literary experiences in Norway. The study's findings showed that participants used the chosen fictional texts as instructional instruments to pique their critical thinking abilities. Through their literary investigation, the participants encountered novel situations and learned about viewpoints different from their own. Kibler and Chapman (2019) also reflect that the use of culturally and thematically relevant texts foster students' reading habits, stimulate the love of reading and broaden their social consciousness. Glazier and Seo's (2005) study also documented the experiences of 9th graders with Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. The findings reflected that students found their voices as such multicultural texts shed light on others' cultures and hold up a mirror to students' on culture. Readers' potential personal interaction with a literary work has been researched by Louwerse and Kuiken (2004). The results showed how readers' personal participation in the text was influenced by the characters' experiences, the setting, the plot, and the events in the text. Vasquez's study (2003) with young children, DeNicolo and Franquiz's (2006) study with 4th-grade children and Dutro's (2010) qualitative analysis of third graders' experiences present similar results.

Even though a lot of studies have looked at children's responses to fiction, very few studies have been conducted with adult readers. Liaw (2001) researched Taiwanese university students' responses to five American short stories. The results showed that because the topics were more closely related to their social situations, the students actively formed meaning through their interaction with the text rather than simply understanding it. Syed (2019) studied undergraduate students' reactions to four novels more recently. As opposed to novels that were culturally and temporally distant from the respondents, those that were more relevant to their own life experiences and socio-cultural environment were comprehended and connected to by the participants more effectively, according to the researcher's results.

Besides these aspects of moral and ethical values in literary texts, In her Transactional Reader-Response Criticism, Rosenblatt (1994) similarly emphasizes the importance of teachers in fostering students' comprehension of texts and providing literary commentary. Young (1987) identified three variables—the text, the reader, and the teacher—that affect the interpretation attributed to every literary piece. Teachers keep an eye on and make changes to our readings. The understanding of literary texts by students is fundamentally based on this tripartite relationship. According to Rosenblatt (1994), the reading and responding process is similar to a triangle, with the teacher's role being on the outer, generating awareness, providing prompts, and encouraging the reader to establish contextual connections. Without the help of the teachers, the reaction might be too constrained. However, if students fail to have literary experience, it is the teachers' role to construct a schema to increase their interest and involvement in the text being enjoyed (Benton & Fox, 1990). The reviewed literature also reflects that learners' preferences to literature are affected by teachers and their instructional strategies (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994; Beard, 2001; McGee, 2003). In short, The Reader-Response Theory promotes an educational approach that values individual responses. Such instruction can pique students' interest in literary works and help them develop the communication skills necessary to express their opinions about the outcomes literary writings have generated as well as their own literary experiences.

Rosenblatt (1994) further talks about the various reading styles that affect the transactional process. When reading in Efferent mode, readers look for information in the text. While in the aesthetic mode of reading, readers form a close bond with the text through participation in the narrative, identification with the characters, and sharing of their struggles and emotions, all of which elicit strong emotions such as approbation or disapproval (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994). Pike also feels that literary texts are most effective

when they urge readers to consider their own lives (2003). As a result, the emotional motivations of readers are connected to the aesthetic reading style. Conflicting impulses are sparked by the emotional and cognitive tensions, which are where thinking typically comes from.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study follows a qualitative research design. The data for this study was collected from the final year literature classroom at a public sector university in Pakistan where students come from varying socio-cultural backgrounds. The students are reading for an undergraduate degree in English Literature and are studying 15 novels as part of their curriculum in three courses: Fiction, American Literature, and World Literature (see Appendix 1).

Data for this study was collected in two stages. Firstly, anonymous and voluntary feedback was collected from the whole class. We received 52 responses in total. The students were asked to report which novels they liked and which they disliked in their curriculum. In addition, they could also make suggestions for any new additions to the curriculum. Most students chose to explain their answers while there were a few who did not.

At the second stage, we collected data from 14 participants through semi-structured interviews to explore further the answers received in student feedback. Semi-structured interviews were used as they provide in-depth, insightful, and rich data (Bryman, 2012). Kallio et al.'s (2016) model of developing an interview schedule was followed. A schedule was designed after consulting the relevant literature and was piloted before finalizing.

Sampling was done according to Cohen et al.'s (2007) guidelines about considering size, access, representativeness, and sampling strategies. Data at this second stage was collected from 14 participants who were selected through self-selective or volunteer sampling (Bryman, 2012). The number was kept small as the target was rich data, not generalizability (Ritchie, Lewis, and Elam, 2003).

Data collection, at the second stage, took place over a period of two weeks. Data was collected ethically as suggested in methodological literature (e.g. Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2007). Participants were given informed consent forms explaining the project and assuring them of their voluntary and anonymous participation. They were also explained how the data will be used. Interviews lasted an average of twenty minutes. The participants chose to speak in their mother tongue if they wished to. The interviews were later translated into English. We realized the challenges of translation as it involves interpretation (Birbili, 2000; Temple and Young, 2004) and checked each other's work to ensure the reliability of our translations.

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis model. Data was coded using NVivo. We understood coding as a decision-making process and were careful with editing and reviewing the codes (Elliott, 2018). Once the coding was completed, patterns were observed, themes were designed and reviewed. The themes developed from the analysis are reported in the next section.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 The Most Preferred Novels by the Participants

The participants first completed written responses on their preferences where they ranked their choices in relation to various novels in their curriculum (coding details are presented in Appendix 2). At the second stage, semi-structured interviews were conducted with fourteen participants to explore students' responses further. The participants talked about the novels that they preferred the most and gave various reasons for preferring certain novels more than the others. In response to the question about their preferences, *Pride and Prejudice* was the most popular among the participants from the novels they had read. Twenty out of fifty-two participants ranked this novel first in their preference list. In interviews, eight out of fourteen participants said it was because of the relatable themes where they could easily connect to the characters and the storyline. As one of them said, *'It is actually a story of every family where mothers are more conscious about their daughters' marriage proposals and social status'*. One of the female participants remarked,

'It is all about marriages. I was confused about marriage since I have seen the unsuccessful marriage of my parents. That's why I thought all about marriage is like you have to marry someone, you have to suffer. But then, I realized that marriage is not about marrying someone who is unknown. I think you should marry someone whom you love and who cares for you.'

Five out of fourteen participants in interviews also discussed the role of teachers in developing their choice which stimulated their interest and willingness to engage with the novel. One of the participants commented that the instructional strategies facilitated them to seek a personal vital experience. *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy was the second most preferred novel by the participants. Seventeen out of fifty-two participants preferred this novel in terms of their level of association with the themes, drawing personal relevance and the role of the teacher. Eight out of fourteen interviewed participants remarked that since the novel depicts social realities, they could easily relate to the themes. One of the female participants got inspiration from the character of Ammu, her marginalization and sufferings *'as a daughter, a sister, a wife, and a mother'*. Participants connected the novel to gender and

social differences in their own life and society. As one of the female participants commented,

'I like the boldness of the writer, how courageously she has depicted the social realities. In my family, I also see the same as my brothers were allowed to go for university education, but I was not allowed. The same thing is also depicted in Chacko and Ammu. Similarly, the divorced status of both but Ammu was not accepted by the family, Chacko was. This is very common in our society, even the caste system also. We also have few castes in our society who are more respected than others.'

Their preference was also affected by the teaching methods where five out of fourteen participants reflected satisfaction towards pedagogical practices as employed by the teacher. One participant reflected that *"The teacher involved us in group discussions and directed us to evaluate the textual lines. This way, we felt involved in creating meaning"*. Eleven out of fifty-two participants ranked *A Tale of Two Cities* at the third in their preference list. In interviews, the participants listed the reasons as they can relate to the theme of national and social class identity. As one participant remarked *'The novel has its social and historical significance. We came to know about the French revolution, its reasons, and the consequences.'* The novel is also depicting social class differences that participants closely related to their social context which is also divided into upper and lower classes. Next to it, Forster's *A Passage to India* and Golding's *Lord of the Flies* were ranked fourth by eight participants. Camus' *The Plague* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Wilde were the least discussed novels by the participants. Hence, thematic relevance (as mentioned by ten out of fourteen participants) and the role of teachers (as reflected by nine participants) were significant factors in developing participants' preferences towards these novels.

4.2 The Least Preferred Novels by the Participants

The participants were asked about the novels they disliked the most from their curriculum and the reasons for their choices. In response to this question, Kipling's *Kim* was disliked by a majority of the participants compared to other novels. Twelve out of fifty-two participants ranked this novel at first in their list of disliked novels. In interviews, they listed the reasons that it was because of the unclear themes and inadequate teaching strategies. Six out of fourteen participants reflected that the events and the themes were ambiguous for the participants that they were not able to make sense or to closely engage with the text. They reflected that the novel does not have any social significance. In interviews, five out of fourteen participants remarked that

the role of the teacher was very much crucial in developing this choice. As one of the participants remarked:

'The teacher did not clear the events in a linear order. She just focused on critical topics and directed us to go through the events. The motive from the teacher's side was not clear. We were not told what the worth of the work is, the purpose, and the background behind writing this novel. I myself searched on Google and there was a lot of material regarding the great Kim and war between Britain and Afghanistan.'

Thus, the participants denied having a personal engagement with the novel as pedagogical practices were unfavorable to seek vital personal experience.

Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* was the second most disliked novel by the participants. Eleven out of fifty-two participants disliked this novel because of thematic irrelevance. Four out of fourteen participants reflected that the novel is a story of a family's decline in wealth, morality, and sanity, filled with non-linear narrative techniques, a stream of consciousness. As one of the female participants said, "*Sound and Fury*, I don't find any kind of moral in it, any kind of aesthetic pleasure, it's all confusing and a stream of consciousness." The novel did not offer a clear and consistent philosophy and they were not able to relate to any of the events in the story. Since the novel did not offer strong opportunities for students to deal with specific social and cultural themes, participants found the novel culturally and morally irrelevant to their context.

Nine out of fifty-two participants ranked Cervantes' *Don Quixote* at the third in the list of their dislikes. In interviews, three participants elaborated the reasons as they were not able to relate to the events. The story seemed irrelevant to them where they were not able to understand the worth of having this novel in their course. Four out of fourteen participants reflected that they were not clarified about the message in the novel. As one participant remarked, *'The novel was too difficult for us to understand. I was not able to relate to it. There was a lack of critical appreciation and literary involvement from our side. Our interest was not developed'*. This reflects that some texts could be uninteresting if the reasons for their presence in the curriculum or message are not clearly delivered. Next to it, *To the Lighthouse* was ranked fourth. The participants presented the reasons for their disliking as the novel has a stereotypical representation of females. One of the female participants commented,

'The novel is portraying that females have to sacrifice all the time. The character of Mrs. Ramsey, she always gives. Women are not made to give, but to receive as well. That's why I dislike the novel because of this kind of depiction.'

Mrs. Ramsey is projected as a role model and we all have to follow her. Every individual is a different being. We should not try to mold her into different versions.'

Two of the participants criticized the inadequacy of teaching strategies that did not stimulate their interest in the novel. While going through the novel, the participants *'did not go through the lines but covered brief summary, even whole chapters in just a few sentences.'*

Five of the participants disliked Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* as the novel presents a distorted picture of culture. Four participants remarked that the novel is culturally irrelevant, reflecting moral sensitivities. Participants showed their anger regarding the presence of this novel in their curriculum, as one of them clearly said, "we should delete it from the syllabus". One of the female participants was not able to talk openly about the themes of the novel. She was reluctant to speak about such a type of mother-son relationship as depicted in the novel. Participants found the novel ethically and morally unrelated to their moral values. One female participant commented:

'The novel has vulgarity, nothing ethical. Some students in the class are of a weak, immature mind. We live in an Islamic country so all such things should be avoided. Such novels should not be taught to students because what happens with this is that students keep God on one side and they start believing in love. After studying here for 4 years, the students turn atheist. That is because of these novels. Those who have weak minds, their beliefs get shaken.'

Other novels like *Lord of the Flies* and *A Passage to India* were least discussed by the participants. Hence, thematic relevance (as remarked by ten out of fourteen participants), socially insignificant, and moral sensitivities (as discussed by eleven out of fourteen participants) were the factors in developing students' disliking towards various novels. Teaching strategies was also an important factor in connection with students' preferences of novels. However, due to limitations of time and space that would be focused in detail separately in another paper.

4.3 Suggestions for Novels to be added in English Literature Curriculum

Participants were also asked about novels that they wanted to be added to their curriculum. Twelve out of fifty-two participants favored adding modern literature in the curriculum. They reflected that since it is difficult for them to relate to the older ones, hence they preferred a temporal context where they can easily relate to the events of the stories. They suggested a few names from contemporary literature such as Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Khalid Hosseini's *A*

Thousand Splendid Suns, and Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of Baskervilles*. Ten out of fifty-two participants were inclined towards Pakistani literature where they recommended adding works of Mohsin Hamid, Paulo Coelho, and Muhammad Hanif.

Nine out of fifty-two participants also remarked that Asian, Turkish, and Russian literature is the most excluded in their course 'World Literature'. Thus they suggested adding such literature to their curriculum. They recommended adding the works of Dostoevsky, Elif Shafaq, Voltaire, and Anton Chekov. Four of the participants were inclined towards motivational novels that display some moral, cultural, and ethical values. Three participants recommended adding religious works of Umera Ahmed where the readers can be encouraged to have strong faith and connection with God. Two of the participants recommended adding mystery novels. In all recommendations, the participants also talked about the exclusion of a few novels from their curriculum. In their list of exclusions, *Kim*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Sons and Lovers*, *To the Lighthouse* and *Don Quixote* were rated the most to be replaced by some other novels. The most suggested ones were Elif Shafaq's *Forty Rules of Love*, Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, and Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*.

4.4 Role of Teachers and Teaching Techniques in Developing Participants' Choices

The participants' responses reflect the role of teachers in developing their choices. Students' perceptions of instructional strategies influence their perceptions of preferences. Nine out of fourteen interviewed participants talked about the positive contribution of teachers in developing their preferences towards particular novels. They reflected that instructional strategies encouraged them to have the potential to open up multiple avenues of exploration from the literary world. Whereas eleven out of fourteen participants reflected the role of teachers in developing their disliking towards various novels as mentioned earlier. They reflected that pedagogical practices were not devised in a way that can stimulate them to draw personal relevance. The classes were solely based on lecture methods where students felt completely indifferent.

Since teaching strategies was one of the responses affecting factors, the participants put few suggestions for teachers. Nine out of fourteen participants talked about the importance of the original text. Four participants complained that the teachers watered down the real charm of literary texts through the use of guides and articles that summarized stories rather than going towards the original text. The participants advised against this strategy

and advised teachers to encourage students' passion of learning so that they can better explore literature and develop their literary inclinations. Instead of expecting students to understand a text's levels of meaning in the same way that teachers did, it is important to value their reactions. Instead of constructing interpretations, literature teachers should concentrate on teaching students how to convey them. As one participant commented,

'I say fiction is very philosophical. So, teachers who are appointed to teach should have interests of their own. They should have read the novel they are going to teach. Because I say personally, there were teachers who have not had a reading. They were just having summaries and all. We also had the same approach like reading summaries and guides. This hinders our understanding of the novels.'

The participants also recommended implementing various pedagogical approaches to help students interact with the texts. Eight out of fourteen participants suggested showing video clips where necessary so that students can get clear ideas about story events. Four out of fourteen participants also recommended proper checks and balances. Participants also put forward a few suggestions for curriculum designers. Five of the participants recommended that while designing curriculum and choosing the novels to be taught, consideration be given to contextual relevance as one of the responses affecting factors, *'avoiding the texts that sensationalize, enumerate unusual customs or stereotypes.'* Relatable themes and participants' contextual background both are important in developing their likeness towards the novels.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Students' Preferences based on Thematic Relevance and Social Significance of Literary Texts

Based on the findings, it was observed that the relatability of themes was important to the students. If the themes in the novels could be directly connected to their lives, they enjoyed and preferred the novel and if they could not find thematic relevance, they did not enjoy reading the novel and would want it to be not included in the syllabus. They were able to connect to the theme of marriage in *Pride and Prejudice*. This relates to what Rosenblatt's (1938/1970, 1978/1994) transactional model suggests- transaction of meaning occurs between reader and text, and only then meaning is created. Flynn (2007) also proposes that the reader by bringing their own experiences makes meaning of the text. Our data, like that of Liaw (2001), Louwerse and Kuiken (2004) and Syed (2019), suggests that the transaction is easier when the readers have something to contribute to what the text has to say, from their

own experiences. For example, students could draw on their own experiences about marriage and connect to the theme, the domestic portrayal and the characters' actions in *Pride and Prejudice* even though the novel was from a different temporal and geographical setting. Similarly, with *The God of Small Things*, the participants could connect easily to the novel as they understood the cultural context and had prior experiences that helped them engage with the text.

The findings also showed that the participants found it difficult to connect to some of the novels in their syllabus. They could not connect to the theme of the search for an identity in *Kim* or the familial circumstances presented in *The Sound and The Fury* and the complex writing technique used in *To the Lighthouse*. This also connects to our argument about the participants' ability to make personal connections being important in their preference, or otherwise, of novels. When the participants did not develop any personal connection with a given novel, they could not transact meaning with the text (Rosenblatt, 1938/1970). Fang et al. (1999) have also argued on the basis of their findings that the inability to draw any personal parallels between the text and themselves or their experiences disrupts their inclination towards the novel.

The personal connection to the novels was important to the participants not just when they talked about the novels in the curriculum but also when they were asked if they had any suggestions for adding works in the syllabus. They talked about works that were geographically and temporally close to them such as the works of Pakistani English writer Mohsin Hamid, Roy's second novel, Urdu writers like Umera Ahmed, Afghani writer Khalid Hosseini or Turkish author Elif Shafak. As these are all contemporary authors, it is evident that participants feel that they can connect easily to these novels based on their experiences as suggested by Varquez's (2003) study as well.

5.2 Students' Preferences based on the Teaching Strategies

Besides the importance of relatability of themes, there was a lot of focus on teaching styles by the participants. The novels have been taught over two semesters through three different modules by four different teachers which impacted the way participants connected to the novels. Teaching strategies was an important factor that made students like or dislike a novel. While giving reasons for liking *The God of Small Things* and *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, the participants considered the role of the teacher an important factor besides themes, characters, or events that they could understand and connect to. Teaching strategies were a more common factor for disliking novels. Students mentioned that they relied on summaries and were not

familiarized with the text in class when talking about novels that they did not prefer. With a course in which eight novels are discussed over a semester, students' expectations to read the text in class can be unrealistic. However, as McGee (2003) suggests, teachers can help improve students' understanding of literature through some guided reading and discussion over literary classics. The participants in this study pointed out the need for more interactive methods of teaching and an aesthetic approach to teaching literature. As Reynolds (2000) states a more constructivist pedagogy where knowledge is created in a shared environment is more suitable for a literature class.

Rosenblatt (1938/1970; 1978/1994) emphasizes the role of a teacher in the meaning-making process of any literary text. The participants in this study disliked many classics including *Don Quixote* which is widely known as one of the best works of literature. As mentioned in the findings section, one of the participants explained why she did not like *Don Quixote* saying it was too difficult for them and that their "interest was not developed". Some students went as far as suggesting that the teachers were themselves not interested in the novels and some did not even read it. As Benton and Fox (1990) argue, it is the job of the teacher to help the students develop an interest in work. *To the Lighthouse* is rejected based on the complex writing technique used as they do not understand Woolf's stream of consciousness. Such classics cannot just be omitted from an undergraduate course in Literature. As Beard (2001) emphasizes, the teachers need to polish the students' literary tastes. Due to limitations of time and space, teaching strategies will be focused in detail separately in another research paper.

5.3 Students' Preferences based on Moral Sensitivities of Literary Texts

Ethical reading of the novels is an important aspect of teaching and learning literature in the context. *Sons and Lovers*, for example, was disliked due to its "vulgarity". Moral values presented in the text were an important indicator for students' preference or otherwise of the novel. Rather than relying on the work's aesthetic value like Posner (1997) suggests, the participants are reading it morally as the Norwegian participants in Skarstein's (2013) study. It can be interpreted that literary works have the power to affect students' social and moral values as argued by Crocco (2004) and that teachers can play a huge role in directing the students towards important aspects other than the moral (Gearon, 2019).

Using texts from a European context in an Asian setting is also potentially problematic as morality may be defined differently in different contexts. As in Crocco's (2005) study, an American author's depiction of the

Pakistani context was unacceptable to the Pakistani readers in a multicultural setting, similarly, certain values projected in given works were not acceptable to the Pakistani undergraduate students. Having a moral lesson in a story seemed to be important to the readers as while talking about *The Sound and The Fury*, one participant mentioned the absence of a moral as the reason for his dislike of the novel.

Moreover, when asked which novels should be added to the syllabus, students emphasized novels with religious or moral implications. Some of them mentioned names of works such as *Forty Rules of Love* or works by Umera Ahmed, a contemporary Urdu novelist, while others explicitly mentioned that moral and religious themes should be a selection criterion for fiction. So, to these readers, moral readings formed an important part in their choice of literary works (see also Nussbaum, 1994; Gearon, 2019).

A variety of themes, styles, and genres are an important element in developing a curriculum for a diverse audience (e.g. Cox, 1991). When asked for suggestions the participants' suggestions varied from Russian literature to Asian authors, from mystery novels to religious works. Researchers like Lintner (2011) have suggested the inclusion of varied moral texts so as to improve students' moral understandings. Others like Stotsky (1991) have recommended multicultural texts to increase tolerance among students. A variety of texts curtailing the needs of the students with some amount of teacher training can, therefore, help the students take more interest in all novels.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

We conclude that students' personal life experiences play a significant role in determining their preference for novels in their curriculum. While talking about novels liked and disliked, morality was a notable factor. Based on the findings, it is therefore argued that a varied curriculum keeping in view the students' social, cultural, and temporal setting should be designed. As this study was based at only one university, it is suggested that such studies be conducted at other universities in the country as to determine if the findings are valid in other contexts as well.

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Table no. 1: List of Novels included in BS English Literature Curriculum

Courses	Novels
Fiction	<i>Tom Jones</i> by Henry Fielding <i>A Tale of Two Cities</i> by Charles Dickens <i>Pride and Prejudice</i> by Jane Austen <i>A Passage to India</i> by E.M. Forster <i>To the Lighthouse</i> by Virginia Woolf <i>Sons and Lovers</i> by D.H. Lawrence <i>Ulysses</i> by James Joyce <i>The Picture of Dorian Gray</i> by Oscar Wilde <i>Kim</i> by Rudyard Kipling <i>Lord of the Flies</i> by William Golding
American Literature	<i>The Sound and the Fury</i> by William Faulkner <i>A Farewell to Arms</i> by Earnest Hemingway
World Literature	<i>Don Quixote</i> by M. De Cervantes <i>The God of Small Things</i> by Arundhati Roy <i>The Plague</i> by Albert Camus