

# **The Concept of Fate in American and British Literature in Henry James's**

*The Portrait of a Lady* and Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*  
in

## **Comparison with Fate in the Islamic Perspective**

مفهوم القدر في الادب الامريكي والانكليزي في رواية لوحة امرأة للكاتب هنري جيمس  
ورواية عودة ابن البلد للكاتب توماس هاردي ومقارنته من منظور اسلامي

**A Paper presented by: Iman Abdulsattar Abdulatif**

الباحثة ايمان عبد الستار عبد اللطيف

### **Abstact**

The concept of fate has been dealt with widely in literature. Almost all people believe in fate and consider it an important factor that determines their conditions and the consequences of their actions. Many nations and in almost all religions, fate is considered as the crucial element that controls people's lives. At times, fate could stand pro or against people's preplanned decisions and thus would change the course of their intentions. Literaturewise, many writers have written about the concept of fate and its effect and impact upon the characters.

This paper tackles how the conception of fate is seen and regarded from the Islamic perspective and how they believe in the fate of God desperately. The paper will also deal with the British novelist Thomas Hardy and the American novelist Henry James and how they wrote about the fate of their characters specifically in their works: **The Return of the Native** and **The Portrait of a Lady**.

The paper also tackles the fate of certain characters in these two novels if it is seen from the Islamic perspective.

Consequently, fate is considered as the overall power that controls the circumstances and consequences of people in almost all cultures and religions. It plays a crucial role and it is an inescapable fact that determines the issues of many people.

## I

The concept of fate has been tackled widely in literature. Almost all people believe in the fate of God which determines their lives. However, this notion also differs from one nation to another according to the religious, cultural, and historical background of that nation. Fate is " the power that is believed to control everything that happens and that cannot be stopped or changed"(1). Many nations would just consider fate (regardless of God) as the power to control all events that cannot be influenced. Others believe that fate is determined by God and that God has the overall power to decide one's actions and consequences.

The usual course of life is that people wish to live longer, attain wealth and prosperity, and to fulfill various ambitions and aspirations. These achievements, at times, could be reverted or could never be fulfilled as more powerful forces beyond people's control could decide something else for them. In many countries, this is called fate or destiny and people believe that God has the supreme power to control their fate. This idea, to some extent, differs in other nations as they believe that nature controls the fate of people (not necessarily naming it as God). This is due to the modernization in different aspects of life; whether culturally, scientifically, or socially speaking.

Muslims believe desperately in the fate of God. It is the way they have been brought up according to their rituals, religious beliefs and most of all according to the Holy Qur'an. The Muslim tend to believe blindly that everything is

controlled and fated by the power of God, for the Qur'an states "Verily, We have created all things with Qadar[fate]"(2). And in another Sur'aa in the Holy Qur'an, God says "And whosoever puts his trust in Allah, then he will suffice him. Verily, Allah will accomplish his purpose. Indeed Allah has set a measure for all things"(28.65:3). In other words, God has the supreme power to create and plan things for human beings according to their fate.

Many individuals have the desire to be successful and wealthy, have certain ambitions to marry the best soul-mate, etc. However, fate at times, is more powerful than their desires because God has chosen something else for them. If they never attain the prosperity they have dreamed of nor the fulfillment of their ambitions, they would then imply this to God's power and that all their unfulfilled plans have been ordained by the power of God. Thus, confirming the fact that it is their fate.

All people understand that death is inevitable and naturally in certain cases people would die in accidents. Storms, hurricanes and the like are all unavoidable. People perceive the fact of these events as something plausible and credible which are destined by God and cannot be evaded. Thus, people are ordained to die at that particular place and time because it is their fate which has been decided by God to die at that particular time and place. The Prophet Mohammed says in one of his sayings "It is to believe in Allah, His angels, His [Holy] books, His messengers, and the Last Day, and to believe in divine destiny, both the good and the evil thereof"(3).

The Muslims conceive the fact that their fate with all its consequences are preordained by God since the first day of their birth. There would be people who would lead a healthy prosperous life and there would be others who might face obstacles and hardships in their life. At different times, people would start a rough life but then they might lead a life full of happiness and vice versa. This fact is inexplicable in the eyes of the Muslims because it is always related to God's power and he alone is capable of changing their fate and destiny. However, many Muslims would also feel perplexed about their unexplainable fate and the mysterious destiny and fate being incurred upon them by God. Despite this, they comprehend deep inside that everything has been chosen for them by God's fate. It is for that reason most Muslims tend to say "in God's

willing" if they plan for future intentions because they realize that the conception of fate (decided by God) could stand against their preplanned decisions. God also says, "But you cannot will, unless Allah wills. Verily, Allah is Ever All-Knowing, All-Wise"(29.76:30).

The pursuing of people's aims and goals is a must because God also advises people to persevere and proceed in hard work. However, in the case of not achieving and attaining these ambitions, they ought to believe that it is God's fate which has been designed upon them. They should realize it is a test from God and that he wants to see if his people would yield to the belief that their fate is destined by God or not. It is noteworthy to mention that God has given his people minds to think wisely and reasonably. The existence of the laws of God, for instance, the prohibition of stealing, cheating, killing, etc. are all stated in the Holy Books and people should abide by these rules. Thus, if a person steals or cheats in order to be rich and would later admit that he/she was fated for such an action, he would be absolutely mistaken.

There are various facts in life that are determined by the fate of God and people take the credulity of these facts for granted. Thus, one's own; birth and death, success and failure, and even marriage are all preordained by God's will-power. Marriagewise, the Muslims tend to believe that marriage is also a matter of fate. It is the fate of a husband or a wife to fall in love or to marry his/her soul-mate. The Arab Muslims refer to the term "kisma" or "naseeb" which is usually related to marriage. It is the chemistry that joins and connects two different persons under one roof. Literaturewise, Cupid is associated to such connection and many writers have written novels and plays which relate marriage or love according to their characters' fate. Often characters in literature as Salami states, "try to arrange for their own happiness and for that of others. Just as often, fate comes between a character and his or her best-laid plans... . Fate is more powerful than the desires of individuals"(4). Hence, literary, culturally or religiously speaking a husband and a wife are joined by fate as well.

## II

In **The Return of the Native** (1878), the novelist Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) wanted to portray the intensity and significance of life and fate among some ordinary people. Egdon Heath is the setting of his story where he wanted to manifest it symbolically for its timelessness. Hardy also wanted to show how fate intervenes in the lives of his characters. Some of the characters have certain plans but "cannot always get what [they] want in life"(5) for fate is stronger and more powerful than their desires.

Hardy describes nature on Egdon Heath meticulously to mirror the inner thoughts of the characters and to prove how man is insignificant in the face of nature or fate. Throughout the novel, he refers to nature as the overall power that controls the fate of his characters. He does not literally refer to the word God but he keeps his readers to consider the fact that all changes of events are ascribed to a more powerful force which is beyond their control. The occurrence of storms, rain and the hot summers are all controlled by God. Hardy reflects the occurrence of these aspects of nature to the fate of his characters. It is on a very stormy night that Eustacia Vye dies which comes completely against her wish of running away with Wildeve. It is also on a very hot summer afternoon that Mrs. Yeobright is bitten by a snake and hence faces her death. Mrs. Yeobright has planned to reconcile with her son, but fate just seemed to stand against her. Clym Yeobright too, the central character, who has come from Paris full of hope to educate the rustic people on Egdon Heath becomes blind-sighted just because fate is stronger than his will. Thus, Hardy seems to be giving a lesson here that people should not be negligent to fate or the power of God.

Similarly, to Hardy's lesson, God says in the Islamic religion, "And never say of anything, I shall do such and such thing tomorrow except (with the saying), If Allah wills!"(15.18:23-24). In other words, the future plans and decisions of people will only be accomplished if God wishes to. So people may decide certain actions or goals in their lives but could never be attained unless the fate of God is accredited and assigned upon them. Thus, as Salami states, "fate

seems to rule events [in **The Return of the Native**] according to some vast pattern which is beyond human control"(6).

Marriagewise speaking, Thomas Hardy in **The Return of the Native** seemed to be showing that fate plays a great role. His characters are caught up in a web of circumstances. Both Eustacia Vye and Damon Wildeve feel more sophisticated than the ordinary people living on Egdon Heath. They are attracted to each other because they both share demanding aspirations to escape to a better life. But when she finds a better chance to live a more prosperous life with Clym Yeobright (thinking that he might take her to Paris), she begins to sketch her dreams in marrying him. At the beginning, fate seems to side with her and thus marriage is accomplished. However, when Clym Yeobright loses his eye-sight later on in the novel, Eustacia Vye gets totally disappointed and decides to leave him to run away with Wildeve. Thus, fate is the principle element which connected them in holy matrimony and fate too is the cause of their separation. Had fate not made Clym Yeobright blind, the possibility of Eustacia's tragic death could have been averted.

Likewise, had fate taken a different path, Thomasin Yeobright would not have got married to the dairy farmer (Diggory Venn) after her husband's (Wildeve's) tragic death with Eustacia in the stormy weather. Earlier in the novel, Thomasin Yeobright is drawn to Wildeve for he has such a likeable character and she cannot resist marrying him despite her aunt's (Mrs. Yeobright's) rejection. However, when she realizes his passion for Eustacia even after their marriage, Thomasin is already entangled with him and realizes it was her own fate to have put her under such a situation. Despite all this, fate seems to reconcile with Thomasin when Wildeve, her husband, is drowned with Eustacia at the end of the novel and Thomasin marries Diggory Venn. Thus, fate has played a crucial role in the lives of the above characters.

From the Islamic perspective, it would be said that Thomasin and her former husband, Wildeve, were fated to be joined together. They would also say that the fate of God has chosen the stormy weather to drown both Wildeve and Eustacia. They never ignore the fact (as in all religions) that storms and such events are ordained by God. In the Christian religion, the doxology after the Lord's Prayer " For the Kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and

forever"(7) also asserts the fact that "the greatness, glory and the majesty of God not only in heaven but on earth as well. God is exalted as head above all"(8). The overall power, fate and glory of God upon all incidents of life and upon his own mankind is also stated in the Lord's Prayer:

Our Father [God] in heaven  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven (9)

Hence, the fate of God is considered in almost all religions as the principle element to regulate and frame man's actions and even decisions.

In **The Return of the Native**, one can consider fate as the principle factor which has harmonized and mounted Thomasin and Diggory Venn's relationship. Hence, fate has made Diggory a suitable match and a perfect second husband for her. Many Arab Muslims would refer to the word "kisma" or "naseeb" here for it is Thomasin's and Diggory's kisma or fate to be united. God states in the Holy Qur'an:

And among His Signs is that He created for you wives from among  
yourselves, that you may find repose in them, and He has put  
between you affection and mercy. Verily, in that are indeed signs for a people  
who reflect (21.30:21)

Likewise, the Arab Muslims would say it is Eustacia Vye's kisma or fate that she gets married to Clym Yeobright and it is her fate too that she gets drowned in the stormy weather. Thus, confirming the fact that fate could never be overlooked or neglected.

The soliloquy of Eustacia Vye just before her drowning manifests her belief in fate too. She feels entangled and undergoes a spiritual suffering, "I have been

injured and blighted and crushed by things beyond my control! O, how hard it is of Heaven to devise such tortures for me, who have done no harm to Heaven at all!"(10). On one hand, she conceives the fact that it has been her own mistake that has led her to her decline. On the other hand, she also understands that fate or Providence has played a great role in crushing her aspirations. She thus blames fate and does not have the perception why the Heavens have inflicted and devised such torture upon her. She thinks she has done "no harm to Heaven at all"(p.354) and hence feels totally shaky, unsteady and senses the alarming peril that would face her, i.e., her drowning.

Looking at Eustacia Vye's condition from an Islamic perspective, they would verify that God has already assigned and set certain measures for Eustacia simply because it is her fate, "Verily, Allah[God] will accomplish his purpose. Indeed Allah has set a measure for all things"(28.65:3). This correlation of the concept of fate whether in the Islam or Christian religion is of no coincidence. Most people would relate a closeness between their own unfulfilled desires or desolate conditions to fate, as shown in the case of Eustacia Vye. So it is quite significant that the characters or even people in real life should be well-convinced of the power of fate, i.e., faith in fate. They should weigh and express the relevance of the influence of fate upon their own lives.

### III

Henry James (1843-1916) has included the conception of fate in his novel **The Portrait of a Lady** (1881) in an implicit way. The marriage of his heroine and hero, Isabel Archer and Gilbert Osmond, can be dealt with in an applicable way to fate. Despite the fact that Isabel Archer acts decisively and empowered by her own free-will to marry Gilbert Osmond, fate seems to be even more powerful than her own ambitions. She represents the American democratic manner that was beginning to take its shape when James wrote the novel.

In the outset of the novel, Isabel Archer has unlimited aspirations to see the world around her and to widen her horizon. When she comes to London to live



in her aunt's house, she is faced with two good choices of marriage. Following her own mind for freedom, she rejects those two suitors (Casper Goodwood and Lord Warburton) only to get entrapped in marrying Gilbert Osmond. Osmond is a man who appreciates and values his self-esteem above anything else. Though Isabel realizes his deception for marrying her for her own wealth, she adheres to her morals and decides to return to her husband at the end of the novel. Sigi Jottkandt states that, "Isabel first marries Osmond on aesthetic grounds. She returns to him on ethical ones"(11). It is thus fate to have joined them together on aesthetic ground because she is so overwhelmed by his appearance. Fate too can be considered as the cause of Isabel's return to her husband at the end of the novel especially after her commitment to her daughter-in-law (Pansy) of never leaving her alone.

At times there are certain social or cultural issues that man thinks his/her fate has been formulated according to those issues. Sen and Chopra state that there are "social factors like greed, malice, curiosity etc. [which] are the determining factors of people's destiny and freedom"(12). Had fate made Gilbert Osmond overlook Isabel's fortune, he would never have married her in the first place. And had the fate of God delayed the death of Isabel's father early in the novel, Isabel's aunt (Mrs.Archer) would never have asked Isabel to accompany her to Europe and meet Osmond.

If it is seen from the Islamic perspective, they would believe that the fate of Isabel and Osmond would never be evaded. Isabel is attracted to the looks and charms of Osmond spontaneously just because fate happens to rule that particular time of her life. Again it is referred in the Arab Muslim term as "kisma" or "naseeb". Later in the novel Isabel tries to infer her own condition when she discovers Osmond's deception for marrying her for his own self-esteem and is ascertained that it has been her own fate to have rejected the previous suitors to get married to Osmond. It is thus her fate that Osmond wanted to use her like a piece of his own antique, like a portrait to be hung and decorated on the wall of his own house.

Recalling that her life has been subjugated and her freedom enslaved by Osmond, Isabel consoles herself among the ruins of Rome where:

In a world of ruins the ruin of her happiness seemed a less unnatural catastrophe. ...it [Rome] interfused and moderated her passion. But she had grown to think of it chiefly as the place where people had suffered. ...where the marble columns, transferred from pagan ruins, seemed to offer her a companionship in endurance (13)

Isabel is contemplating her own fate and disillusionment. She has come to Europe with her meagre knowledge and limited experience in life. Her erratic indulgence and education has made her view life through the medium of literature and through her own imagination only. Her freedom, independence, and her anticipation to delve into new realms (in the outset of the novel) have actually been quenched by the end of the novel. It is thus Isabel's own fate to have made her underestimate her calculations and decision in marrying a person whose only interest is his self-benefit. She realizes later in the novel, where she sits among the ruins of Rome, that she has to accommodate herself to reality with all its strict confines and that her only companion would be her endurance. It is thus Isabel's own fate to have turned her vivacious character and vibrant ideals in life into becoming a completely different person. She has to pay the price which is to accept her suffering and to resume her life with her husband.

Many critics would argue that the chief reason behind Isabel's change is due to her tough determination and her sole decisions and motivations which have truly turned her into an agent of tragedy. However, one can also argue that it is the fate of God to have made her such a strong tough-willed character. It is also her own destiny that her father dies and is thus reunited with her aunt, Mrs. Archer, to live in London and Rome where she meets her destined stubborn husband (Osmond).

Looking at Isabel's condition from the Islamic perspective, they would truly believe that Osmond and Isabel have been joined fatefully in holy matrimony. And that the death of Isabel's father has already been ordained since the day he was created in the womb of his mother. They also believe that the wealth,

prosperity and failure of a human being are all ordained by the will or the fate of God.

Some writers have ascertained that fate or destiny are responsible for steering Henry James into fame especially when he wrote about romance. Caldeira states when romance appears in the works of Henry James, "[it is] as if something is out of the author's control and possesses him"(14). That something which is beyond the author's control is what Caldeira could not specifically name as fate. Henry James too thinks that romance:

leave[s] the matter thus a case, ever, not of an author's plotting and planning and calculating, but just of his feeling and seeing, of his conceiving, in a word, and of his thereby inevitably expressing himself, under the influence of one value or the other(15).

The influence of that "one thing or the other" is the probable fact that Henry James was referring to fate too. It is fate that makes him conceive and express the inevitability of the incidents of his novels. Therefore, it is fate too to have driven James into becoming a successful writer.

## **Conclusion**

Consequently, fate is considered as the overall power that controls the circumstances and consequences of people. Almost all cultures believe in the crucial role of fate and that it is an inescapable fact which determines many issues.

The unavoidability of fate has been understood throughout the ages and in almost all religions. The Islamic and Christian religion adhere to the concept of fate because they realize that fate has been stated in their holy books; the Qur'an and the Bible respectively.

Certain novelists mention the word Providence or Heavens when writing about the fate of their characters. Others would just reflect the notion of fate implicitly in their writings. Many others would just use the word nature (not necessarily naming it as the fate of God) to reflect its powerful influence upon the characters.

Hence, it is a matter of belief in the faith of fate and that fate is the determining factor of most of people's accidents, fortune, hazards, luck, etc. Accordingly the Islamic religion has the tendency in the belief of fate desperately. They consider it as a significant element and a powerful force that rules their decisions and even their outcome. Consequently, it is inferred in almost all religions that events are governed and doomed by fate and thus people's further actions and status would then be regulated according to its effect.

## Notes

- (1) A.S. Hornby, **Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary**, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.558
- (2) Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan, **Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'an** ( Saudi Arabia: Darussalam Publishers and Distributers, 2001), p.763

For susequent references to this source, the part number, the hizb number and the Aya number will be indicated only.

- (3)An' Nawawi's Forty Hadith, [www.vb.zyom.com/t18120.html](http://www.vb.zyom.com/t18120.html)

Retrieved in 23/10/2013

- (4)Ismail Salami, **Study of Thirty Great Novels** (Tehran: Mehrandish Books, 1999), p.427

(5)Ibid., p.428

(6)Ibid., p.429

- (7)[www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord's Prayer](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord's_Prayer)

Retrieved in 31/10/2013

(8)Ibid.

(9)Ibid.

- (10)Thomas Hardy, **The Return of the Native** (New Delhi: UBS Publisers' Distributors Pvt. Ltd., 2010), p.354 Reprint. For susequent references to this source, only the page number will be stated.

(11)Sigi Jottkandt, "Portrait of an Act: Aesthetics and Ethics in *The Portrait of a Lady*", **The Henry James Review**, vol.25, no.1 John Hopkins University Press (Winter 2004) p.68

- (12)S. Sen and J.K. Chopra, **The Portrait of a Lady. A Critical Study** (New Delhi: Unique Publishers, 2007), p.27

(13)Henry James, **The Portrait of a Lady** (England: Penguin Books,1968), p.517-18

(14)Isabel Caldeira, "Perception and Representation in Henry James *The Portrait of a Lady*", **Biblos**, vol.LXV (1989) p.248

(15)Henry James, **The Art of the Novel:Critical Prefaces** [1934],ed. R.P. Blackmur (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), p.30

### **Bibliography**

- *Al-Hilali, Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din and Khan, Mohammad Muhsin. **Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'an**. Saudia Arabia: Darussalam Publishers and Distributers, 2001.*
- An' Nawawi's Forty Hadith, [www.vb.zyzom.com/t18120.html](http://www.vb.zyzom.com/t18120.html)
- *Caldeira, Isabel. "Perception and Representation in Henry James *The Portrait of a Lady*", **Biblos**, vol.LXV (1989)*
- *Hardy, Thomas. **The Return of the Native**. New Delhi: UBS Publisers' Distributors Pvt. Ltd., 2010. Reprint*
- *Hornby, A.S. **Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary**, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.*
- *James, Henry. **The Art of the Novel:Critical Prefaces** [1934],ed. R.P. Blackmur. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962.*
- *James, Henry. **The Portrait of a Lady**. England: Penguin Books,1968.*
- *Jottkandt, Sigi. "Portrait of an Act: Aesthetics and Ethics in *The Portrait of a Lady*", **The Henry James Review**, vol.25, no.1 (Winter 2004).*
- *Salami, Ismail. **Study of Thirty Great Novels**.Tehran: Mehrandish Books, 1999.*
- *Sen, S. and Chopra, J.K. **The Portrait of a Lady. A Critical Study**. New Delhi: Unique Publishers, 2007*

## مفهوم القدر في الادب الامريكي والانكليزي في رواية لوحة امرأة للكاتب هنري جيمس ورواية عودة ابن البلد للكاتب توماس هاردي ومقارنته من منظور اسلامي

الباحثة ايمان عبد الستار عبد اللطيف

### خلاصة البحث

لقد تم تناول موضوع القضاء والقدر بشكل واسع في الكتابات الأدبية حيث أن معظم الأمم تؤمن بهذا الموضوع ومدى تأثيره على ظروفهم وقراراتهم. بعد مفهوم القدر في العديد من المجتمعات وفي معظم الأديان عاملا اساسيا وأنه هو الذي يتحكم في الكثير من مصير وقرارات البشر. وأحيانا يقف القدر بشكل معاكس أو ايجابي للقرارات المتخذة مسبقا من قبل الأشخاص وبالتالي نحدث التغييرات في مجرى حياتهم. وقد تناول هذا الموضوع العديد من الكتاب وبيّنوا أهمية القضاء والقدر وانعكاسه على شخصياتهم الأدبية في كتاباتهم.

تم تناول موضوع القضاء والقدر في هذا البحث من منظور الدين الإسلامي كما تم تناوله في رواية عودة ابن البلد للكاتب الأكليزي توماس هاردي و رواية لوحة امرأة للكاتب الأمريكي هنري جيمس. وأيضا تتطرق البحث رؤيا القدر لبعض الشخصيات في الروايتين أعلاه من منظور اسلامي.

وبهذا يعد موضوع القضاء والقدر في معظم الأديان وثقافات البلدان من العوامل الأساسية والذي يلعب دورا مهما في مصير البشر وخططهم وانه شئ محتم لا يمكن نكرانه.