

Educating the Literate

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“Who will educate the ordinary people who are mostly illiterate or if literate read only the Urdu papers?” asks B.H. Hadi in response to my last op-ed (“Morality: for women and girls only,” Daily Times, January 14). In that essay, I had questioned whether mandating headscarves for girls and banning music in vans transporting them can “improve morality in society,” as Karachi government officials allege. I argued that focusing on women and girls while overlooking male dress and behavior is contrary to the Qur’an’s teachings on sexual modesty and morality that apply equally to men and women. Further, I noted that the Qur’an does not advance a theory of female sexual or moral corruption or fallibility that has inspired men to try and regulate women’s dress and conduct historically. In effect, I was arguing for a more sensible and gender-inclusive view of morality in line with the Qur’an’s teachings than the travesty proposed by government officials.

Some readers want my views to get a wider hearing but, as B.H. Hadi’s question shows, this is a formidable challenge in a society in which literacy—defined minimally as the ability to read and write one’s own name—remains so abysmally low.

This, of course, raises the question of whether it is even useful to write in English. Not only does this mean reaching a tiny elite, but it also means reaching a group of people that, for the most part, is disinterested in the understanding and practice of Islam, in which I feel deeply invested. To most people of my generation educated in “English-medium” schools, who often speak English as their first language (as I do), Islam has always been the preserve of “Urdu-medium” folk and obscurantist mullahs. (Some years ago, when I spoke about Qur’anic hermeneutics to an audience in Islamabad, a local feminist dismissed me as “a parhi likhi maulani,” or, “an educated woman mullah.”)

If the prospects of engaging the Anglicized Pakistani elites in a dialogue on Islam seem slim, so does the possibility of this elite speaking meaningfully to the “Urdu-medium” folk. The linguistic divide has always also been a cultural, ideological, and religious divide, making it difficult even for the literati to converse with one another in a shared idiom. Such an exercise is rendered even more unlikely by an antidialogic public culture, a consequence of extended periods of political dictatorships, both military and civilian.

The absence of sustained intellectual engagement with each other’s ideas is evident in the media. Public intellectuals and journalists rarely respond to each other’s columns or talks. Indeed, even in forums designed to foster dialogue, people don’t engage one another in a consequential way. At the end of a presentation, most people walk off, while an intrepid few either make hostile interventions that have no relevance to the presentation, or else frame their response to it in the form of rants and harangues, often bordering on insults.

These may be gross and harsh generalizations, but I speak as someone who has attended several public presentations and who writes regularly for a Pakistani newspaper. Rarely does anyone respond to my work and those who do usually attack me instead of engaging

my arguments. An example is an email I got after the publication of my last op-ed (errors in original): “you are very ignorant about Islam, Shariah & the our beloved Koran. I am not sure if you are Ahamedi but what the heck. You know that having degrees does not make one educated nearly a parrot of what one has read. ... People like you condone free sex, drinking, go to wife swinging parties, show off your wares to the poor & public. You lot like to dance, get hugged.. by people in your offices etc. ...If you name was not Muslim I would not have minded, and also after quoting so many theorist who did not have a clue of understanding women, I feel I must respond. I hope you will comment.”

Reading such gratuitously insulting missives alongside B.H. Hadi’s letter makes me wonder if the actual problem is just the lack of literacy or also the nature of literacy. I don’t wish to minimize the problems resulting from not knowing how to read or write since that deprives people of certain modes of knowledge and Islam valorizes acquiring knowledge. (It therefore is unconscionable for a Muslim state not to do its best to educate its citizenry.) At the same time, it is clear that knowing how to read and write does not make one an educated person in the best and most obvious sense of the term.

Many literate Pakistanis know nothing about Islam other than what they have been able to glean from the same mullahs they decry. Those who do know about it often have read only the secondary religious texts. Many who have read the Qur’an don’t know its meanings (because they read it only in Arabic without knowing Arabic itself). Others rely blindly on one scholar’s interpretation of a scripture as rich and complex as the Qur’an. And yet almost everyone thinks of themselves as an authority on the subject. If this is the state of the educated classes (and I am speaking of general tendencies only), then what is one to expect of the “illiterate masses?” Who is the real culprit here: the illiterate person who knows no better, or the literate person who does not *want* to know any better?

Given all this, I doubt that if I were writing in Urdu, people would heed my words. Even so, if someone finds my work interesting, they can translate it into another language for the benefit of those who don’t know English. Only through a sustained and collaborative effort will it be possible to educate the illiterate and literate alike in egalitarian readings of Islam. And that is why I persist in writing what I do in the language I know best.