

Literature and Imagination

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The curricular struggle over which novels should be taught in the English Department of Punjab University, my alma mater, has come as a shock to many people, but I must confess to being rather more astonished by people's shock and the fact—which I didn't know until now—that ex-army wallahs are in charge of running the university.

As far as I can tell, some people (specially a male faculty member) want to remove some novels from the syllabi on the grounds that they deal with themes that students are ill-equipped to engage. Not surprisingly, these themes relate to sexual matters defined not only narrowly as explicit references to sex, but also more broadly, as suggestive words.

This attempted censorship is symptomatic of a wider social malaise, but the one article I've read so far on the subject doesn't do a particularly good job of delving into this. Rather, the author, a foreign reporter based in Pakistan who sounds suitably appalled, has focused on detailing the drama itself and listing the offending texts and words, as if this were enough to confirm the egregiousness of the would-be censors' behavior.

Frankly, I am as struck by his reaction to the discomfort of these individuals as I am by the latter's unease, because he seems to assume a common cultural and moral universe and, more troublingly, that this universe is beyond doubt or questioning. The reason moral outrage against censorship can work in "the West" is not only because Western societies have legalized the principle of free speech, but also because most (though not all) of their people share the same cultural and sexual mores, even if they occasionally disagree about what constitutes art or appropriate sexual expression. (This is clear, for instance, from the ongoing attempts to define and regulate pornography.)

But striking an indignant posture in Pakistan on the same issue not only shows a lack of understanding of Pakistani society but also a smug chauvinism that takes Western cultural perceptions and practices as the norm in judging it. Such a strategy transforms what may be Western particularisms into a putative universalism without querying either one. Hence the Western reporter makes the Pakistanis who are uneasy about (discussing) sex seem like a benighted lot, without having to explain why they cannot legitimately be uncomfortable with, say, a specific Thomas Hardy novel. Not only that, but he can expect all enlightened folk to share automatically in his outrage.

Actually, as it turns out, I do share in his dismay, but not for the same reasons. For one—and without getting into issues of canonicity or the purpose of education—I believe it's possible to be uncomfortable with, or even reject, a particular form of artistic expression while still honoring art as a universal medium. The fact that one may find it hard to like, or embrace, a specific novel or painting or piece of music does not mean one cannot therefore appreciate literature, or art, or music, or that one is an obscurantist.

At the same time, of course, to be able to appreciate particular expressions of art (novels, music, paintings), may be the most compelling sign of our essentially human desire and ability to connect, through empathy and imagination, with those who are other than us and live in a world far removed from our own. From this perspective, an unwillingness or inability to engage something different can represent a failure of imagination itself.

And yet, such a failure also has to do with social conditions over which individuals may have little or no control. After all, reading (as much as writing) happens in certain social, political, cultural, sexual, and intellectual milieus and is influenced by them. One can thus interpret the discomfort of some English department faculty as reflecting not only the nature and limitations of their own personal boundaries, but also the constraints of the milieu in which they are embedded and in which they are expected to read literature.

Pakistan remains an agrarian/feudal society in terms of its class structure and dominant ideologies and decades of military rule, specially by zealots like Zia ul Haq, have hampered the growth of a tolerant, open, or expressive culture. To top it off, people's collective experience of sexual matters remains, for the most part, coarse and traumatic. It is not just that sex is criminalized but, that sexual expression often takes criminalized forms of violence against women, including gang rapes and "honor" killings. (That the latter two practices are infrequent does not obviate the fact that they have been largely normalized in the popular mindset.)

This is the legacy that the generation—presumably from the upwardly mobile "lower" middle class—that now inhabits Punjab University has inherited, and this is the milieu in which it is reading the allegedly offensive novels. That some of its members don't have the panache or sophistication to cope with issues having to do with sex (at least in the setting of a classroom) should only cause the most unreflective among us any surprise.

Meanwhile, there remains the equally bothersome issue of what the military is doing trying to run universities. Even if it's been running the country for most of its life, there still is something utterly improper about its having assumed the role of gatekeepers of the academy. I say this as the daughter of a lieutenant colonel, now buried in the Western reaches of Canada, who would have been 80 today. He had a B.A. in English Literature (with honors, as he never failed to remind me) from Forman Christian College, but he never took that as a license to run the country or direct the lives of even his own family.

But it was reading his many books—including by Thomas Hardy—when I was quite young that gave me a life-long love of reading and led me also to major in English literature. But, then, I belong to a different generation that still had the freedom to think and, in the words of the poet, to imagine.