

Freeplay of Interpretation

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These days we often hear the accusation that someone or another is doing something nasty by interpreting a book or text out of context.

The common refrain that follows goes something like this: "Who are you to interpret our holy book on your own without the guidance of our supreme religious elders who are so knowledgeable in scriptural knowledge that your own petty knowledge is like that of a gnat's in comparison?" From this bombastic salvo there usually follows the same train of accusations and slander, which include the following:

Muslim/Christian/Buddhist/Hindu feminists are simply reading and re-reading the holy scriptures with their own agendas in mind; that they are engaged in wilful and unregulated interpretation that goes against orthodoxy, etc.

Before we deal with the political nature and consequences of such accusations, let us return to the original premise and deconstruct it a bit.

Interpretation, of any text, is necessarily a subjective, historically-determined and culturally-contextualised endeavour. Every act of reading is necessarily subjective and, therefore, contingent and we cannot escape from the possibility of error, misinterpretation and misappropriation. This is true of reading a holy scripture as it is true about reading the menu of a restaurant, for the fact is that reading is necessarily a risk-laden enterprise and this has more to do with the nature of language as a social phenomena than anything else.

Going back to the genesis of all the major religious belief-systems in the world, we see that the foundational movement of such religions entailed the act of reading and interpretation. From the very outset of revelation itself, the possibility of error and misunderstanding has always been there. This is simply because communication – even in the case of divine communication with mortal beings – carries with it the risk that the message may get lost.

With the passing of time, however, religious texts in particular gain a certain degree of consistency in meaning because of the way that the reading, interpretation and dissemination of such texts is left in the hands of a few, who in turn are elevated to the status of experts.

In the history of the Jewish faith, for instance, the interpretation of Jewish scripture was monopolised by the Rabbinical classes; until the advent of Jesus who was the first to challenge the hegemonic grip of Rabbinical authority. Likewise in Hinduism, the interpretation of Vedantic texts was left in the hands of the Brahminical classes, and only challenged by the likes of the Buddha who trespassed the norms of the discursive economy with his emphasis on the emotional-spiritual (as opposed to ritualistic) development of the individual. In the Islamic tradition, the monopoly over religious textual interpretation was guarded by the Ulema classes, but often challenged by independent lay scholars who opened up and expanded the space of Muslim religious discourse and praxis.

It is therefore ironic that today Muslim women's groups like Malaysia's Sisters in Islam are deemed to have gone beyond the pale of religious normativity by allegedly

interpreting the Quran in a manner that goes against tradition or the sanction of the religious scholars. But hasn't this been the case with so many other Muslim intellectuals who were in fact pioneers in the process of modernising the Muslim mind?

If groups like Sisters in Islam are deemed guilty of 'freely interpreting' religious scripture, then what would we have to say about men like Jamaluddin al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Sir Syed Ahmad Khan?

Syed Ahmad Khan – who founded the Aligarh Muslim University – was one of the first who claimed that unless and until Islamic thought could be measured and judged by the standards of modern science, it would not survive the modern age. For his efforts to modernise our understanding of Islam, he was deemed a materialist and secular thinker; yet he was the one who built the first modern Islamic university in the world that proudly stands until today at Aligarh, India.

Likewise Abul Alaa Maudoodi and Sayyid Qutb were also Muslim thinkers well ahead of their time who broke from sedimented traditions and who offered radically new and modern interpretations of Islam in their time. And when we look at their profiles, they were certainly not traditional ulema by any stretch of the imagination: Maudoodi was trained as a journalist and worked as a pamphleteer and propagandist for his cause. Qutb, on the other hand, was even accused of desecrating the Quran by offering an activist-oriented exegesis of the text that went against customary practice then. But today, does anyone doubt the impact that both Maudoodi and Qutb have had on contemporary Muslim thought and praxis?

Closer to Southeast Asia we have thinkers like Syed Sheikh al-Hady and Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin who were modern thinkers who wanted to adapt the Muslim mindset to the needs of the modern age. Syed Sheikh al-Hady even wrote the Hikayat Faridah Hanum, which remains as the first modern feminist novel in vernacular Malay literature. For his pioneering efforts to emancipate Muslim women from patriarchal tyranny, he too was deemed a secularist and modernist by the conservatives among his peers. But do we doubt or deny his achievements, or the achievements of any of these modernist thinkers today? Certainly not.

So let us clear the decks and understand some simple truths about textual analysis and exegesis: Reading anything – be it a novel or a holy book – is necessarily a subjective process that is always going to be particular, historically specific and necessarily contingent. No text can escape this, for the reason that reading involves an inter-subjective process of engagement with an author that is not present.

We can try our best to remain true to the intended meaning of the text, but we cannot ever claim to have complete knowledge of it.

On that basis, no group can claim to have a monopoly over truth value, and no group can claim to be right simply because they have settled on an agreed consensus.

Traditional conservative scholars who live, work and interact only among themselves and their closed circle of confidants and acolytes may think that they have closed off the process of interpretation simply because they have engineered a consensus among themselves; but this does not mean that the process of reading and interpretation is over and closed for good. Furthermore consensus does not

guarantee truth value, for even if the whole planet thinks that the earth is flat it does not make it so.

For the sake of keeping religious texts and scriptures alive and relevant to the needs of our times, alternative readings are required time and again. That was the intention of scholars like Maudoodi, Qutb, Ahmad Khan and Sheikh al-Hady.

And interestingly, that too happens to be the intention of religious activists like Sisters in Islam and other Muslim, Christian, Hindu and Buddhists activists today.

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