A Word to the Wise

We, Arabs, like to say that we practically invented storytelling. But the reality is that the Arabic novel has remained on the margins of world literature probably since the end of the Abbasid golden age. While nonfiction devoted to politics and religion in the Arab region is always in demand, interest in Arab literature from a Western viewpoint hasn't moved too far past sweetened versions of One Thousand and One Nights, Aladdin and Sinbad. Even celebrated writers like the Egyptian novelist, Naguib Mahfouz, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1988, fail to attract more than a clutch of diehard literati in the region.

Publishers of fiction and literature in the Gulf must confront not only the problems of their counterparts elsewhere, namely, the erosion of the number of readers under the onslaught of satellite television, the Internet and play stations, among other forms of entertainment. But they must also deal with a host of regional factors, including conflicts, censorship and illiteracy, which all combine to threaten the very future of fiction.

According to an old adage about Arab books, Cairo writes, Beirut publishes and Baghdad reads. That changed with the collapse of the cultured and urbane Iraqi middle class under the economic sanctions imposed during the 1990s and with the ongoing mayhem following the US-led invasion.

But some problems predate the region's conflicts, including, most prominently, the language itself. Specifically, the kind of Arabic used in a piece of work can deter swathes of potential readers. The most sophisticated, classical Arabic is understood throughout the Arab world, but comes across on the page as somewhat akin to Shakespeare or even Chaucer to modern Anglo-Saxon ears. On the other hand, national dialects travel badly, with Algerian Arabic, for example, emerging as the densest and least intelligible brogue to Gulf readers.

One of the compromises made famous by such writers as Naguib Mahfouz is to write in classical Arabic for the broadest possible Arab audience. But that requires readers to suspend disbelief when the hookers and petty underworld mobsters of old Cairo strut around waxing lyrical as bards.

And even if the language itself is not a hurdle, governments across the Arab world are constantly banning books. State-owned publishing houses have been producing less and less fiction in recent years, having grown skittish over content in the midst of a barrage of criticism from conservative groups. Even such timeless works as One Thousand and One Nights and the equally salacious Abbasid-era poetry of Abu Nawas are officially prohibited owing to their content – although copies can generally still be found in libraries.

However, perhaps the greatest hurdle to Arab literature is a ubiquitous aversion to reading, which has its roots in the education systems across the region and, more specifically, to the learning by rote imposed on Arab children in their formative years. Elementary school children are required to memorize great chunks of poorly-written, badly-illustrated and usually colourless textbooks. The upshot is that books in general become perceived as tools for punishment by the young to the extent that, upon leaving schools and colleges, many Arabs become committed non-readers for life.

This general lack of reading that restricts Arab intellectual life was raised five years ago by the United Nations in the Arab Human Development Report. Using the dearth of translated foreign works as an indicator of the intellectual decline, the report noted that Spain translates in one year the same number of books that have been translated into Arabic over the past 1,000 years – some 10,000 books in all.

Some homegrown initiatives have set themselves the Herculean task of redressing the situation, most notably Kalima – Arabic for "word" – a nonprofit organization operating under the aegis of the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage, whose noble if drop-in-the-ocean endeavour is to translate and publish 500 contemporary titles a year by 2010. The stated goal is to expose Arabic readers to influential works of world literature and academia, and ultimately to bridge cultures by bringing to the fore great novels and poems that reflect the common humanity of people.

Optimists are quick to make comparisons with the past, recalling that, until the end of the first millennium, Arab scholars and libraries led the world in producing and preserving knowledge in science, medicine, philosophy and the arts. More to the point, it was precisely a respect for the written word by the ruling elite and a drive to translate influential Latin and ancient Greek texts into Arabic that made it all happen.

Of course the counter argument is that – as with the geopolitical stimulus that gave rise to the Abbasid paragon – a true Arab renaissance will require nothing less than a complete collapse of the current world order and a new and prolonged dark age in the West.

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A Simple Solution

Find x, y and z such that x + y + z = 10, x2 + y2 = z2 and xz = y2. Sadly, the solution will depend almost as much on your background as on your mathematical ability. Statistically speaking, Arab students are about twenty times less likely to know how to solve those equations than counterparts in other regions. Put another way, Muslims account for less than 1 per cent of the world's mathematicians and scientists while they make up almost one-fifth of the world's population. By stark contrast, for example, Israel has almost twice as many scientists as all Muslim countries put together.

These are unofficial statistics – governments in the region are naturally edgy about putting figures on the extent of their scientific lag – but they do hint at the prevailing and growing chasms in scientific literacy across the Muslim world.

Over the decades, the low achievement of Muslim science has been attributed to a host of sociological and economic factors, ranging from poverty, the lack of a middle class and the emphasis on rote learning. To be sure, the teaching of science has barely changed in over a century: the focus has remained obstinately on getting students to memorize theories and facts in a vacuum, rather than on encouraging analytical and creative skills.

However, the blame for the scientific malaise cannot be laid exclusively at the door of Arab schools. Leading academics have suggested that the root of the problem is both deeper and considerably thornier; for instance, Abdus Salam, the first Muslim to win a Nobel Prize in

Physics, labelled the teaching of science in Islamic countries as “abysmal” because it dampened the sceptical spirit necessary for good science. And many Arabs are appalled by religious conservatives who would like to introduce so-called “Islamic science” to national curricula aimed at restricting scientific enquiry. Of course, there are parallels in the West where fundamentalist Christian groups dream of replacing Darwinism with creationism, thereby capturing the spirit of “Christian science”.

But science cannot be divided into ethnic, religious or any other kind of flavour. There is only one universe. And besides, it is a form of schizophrenia to accept the benefits of modern technology but not the world view that comes with it.

Moreover, it is deeply ironic that Islam should now be seen by some as the impediment to science and research. Commanded by the Koran to seek knowledge and read nature for divine signs, and inspired by a treasure trove of ancient Greek learning, Muslims created a society that was the scientific centre of the world for half a millennium. This was a true golden age that can count among its credits the precursors to modern universities, al-jabr (to give algebra its Arabic root), a whole slew of Arab falasafah (philosophers) and even the notion of science as an empirical enquiry (elevated to an art form by Muhammad ibn-Musa al-Khwarizmi in the ninth century, who gave his name to algorithms).

Science found such favour in medieval Islam partly because scientific procedures were and remain integral to religious ritual. Arabs had always been knowledgeable about the stars and used them to navigate the desert, but Islam raised the stakes for astronomy. The requirement to face Mecca for prayer, for example, requires knowing the size and shape of the Earth. The best astronomical minds of the Muslim world tackled the job of producing tables by which the qibla, or sacred directions, could be found from any point in the Islamic world.

The subsequent plunge into scientific illiteracy is all the more disheartening given that it was this infusion of Arab knowledge into Western Europe that fuelled the Renaissance and the scientific revolution.

But there is now a nascent dawn – or at least a growing recognition, particularly across the Gulf region, that scientific literacy forms the essential foundation for addressing innovation and economic growth. However, while the education cities that are sprouting across the region are a testament to that recognition, there is a still a need to concretize the kind of scientific education that Arabs will require for the twenty-first century.

If the Gulf is to succeed as a varsity hub, it will need to produce as well as attract enough professional scientists. And this can only be achieved by revamping the entire educational system: rethinking national curricula, retraining science teachers and, especially, securing scientific literacy as a main goal in primary and secondary schools. Only then, when maths and science become almost second nature to most Arab students, will education succeed as an engine capable of lifting them to more promising futures. And only then will they be following in the footsteps of Abu Kamil, the Egyptian mathematician of the ninth century who set the algebraic teaser at the beginning.

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