Muslim South Asian Students in the American Classroom

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I'd like to begin with a brief anecdote which I believe highlights the kind of "academic culture shock" many international students experience in American universities. In my early days of graduate school, here at the University of Houston, I was once having a conversation with one of my professors. I was enrolled in this professor's Late American Literature seminar that semester, and I often enjoyed staying back after class to discuss a variety of things with her, as I tried to make sense of the American academic culture, which was so new to me. During one such conversation, our subject turned to our faiths. As I began to tell her a little about the Quran, the professor asked me how I would react if I happened to find anything in the Quran which appeared contradictory to something else within it. My answer was a simple one: I'd believe that I had misread or misunderstood, and would go back to try to clear my clouded perception. The professor's reaction, however, was different. She said that if she ever came across such a situation, she would think the book was wrong. This is one of the earliest academic culture shocks I experienced in the U.S. I call it an academic one because it represents two different ways of reading, even if it is a reading of a religious text. My experience tells me that religious and cultural values affect the academic values and expectations a student may have, and this becomes especially significant for students who belong to a different background than the mainstream one in which they study.

Writing is now increasingly understood as being socially situated (Connor, "Intercultural Rhetoric Research"). If we keep this in mind when considering students who have a background in non-American academic environments, it becomes a little easier to understand that these students might have different perceptions of what constitutes "good writing" than what they encounter in American academic contexts. Indeed, there have been studies of students coming from Chinese, Finnish, Mexican, and other backgrounds, (Shen; Connor "How Like You Our Fish?"; LoCastro) which indicate that concepts such as audience, critical thinking, and individuality have different meaning in different cultures.

I have yet to find a similar study on South Asian students, and this is what I propose to do today. My focus will be on Muslim South Asian students, so that I do not generalize too broadly about all South Asian students, and also because this is the perspective that I have, and am thus more familiar with. This is especially important in my paper today because the first part of my paper will be based upon observations that come mostly from personal experience. The second, shorter part will briefly discuss the initial results of an ongoing survey. For the purposes of my study, I define "South Asian" as anyone who self identifies as Pakistani or Indian. Though my research has been focused on various aspects of student reading and writing, today I would like to talk about differences in reading practices and conceptions of audience in American and Muslim South Asian students. I believe such discussions would prove useful to teachers who have Muslim South Asian students in their American classrooms.

In the first place, it is important to note that American conceptions of reading entail looking at the text with a critical eye, to note merits as well as faults of the writer, and perhaps most importantly, never to take things at face value. To my understanding, this almost amounts to saying that anything (and anyone, for that matter) can have hidden agendas, and this was confusing to me, because for me, some things are unquestionable.

The anecdote that I began with is very relevant here. My understanding of the Quran as sacred, unalterable truth demands that I treat it with respect. This is in line with what my parents

taught me about having respect for *any* written book—we were forbidden to place our books on the floor because that would be disrespectful. This was the attitude—of respect—that I had when I approached my books. I could hardly think of approaching my books with a critical eye. It was therefore a shock (an academic culture shock, if you will) when in my graduate classes I would hear fellow students criticize writers for being imprecise or confusing, while all along I had felt that I had had trouble with the writings because I was a bad reader. If I came across anything confusing, I would automatically assume that the fault was in me.

The critical approach to reading that was expected of me in the American university classroom was disagreeable to me not only because of my faith, but was also contrary to my upbringing in a Pakistani family. As children, we were always taught to look within ourselves for the solution if we encountered a problem. There is a common saying in the Urdu language which tells a person to peek within their own *geraybaan* (which is Urdu for "collar") before they find fault in others. Peeking within my own collar, before criticizing others is what I had been doing for most of my past life. It was no wonder then, that I was having trouble reading critically—or rather, critically the American way.

I say "the American way" because I had also done critical reading in my Masters classes at the University of Karachi. But there, it had meant something different. Instead of looking for faults, critical reading at the University of Karachi meant a careful, in-depth reading which would identify literary devices and rhetorical moves. It also meant making connections. As I look back into the books that I had originally read those days, I see that I have frequently written in the margins "Cf…." I would be comparing certain points with points made in other books, with verses in the Quran, and even with something my friend had said the other day. My education had taught me that making connections is an important aspect of critical reading.

Along with the academic culture shock that I experienced about reading, I also came to a new understanding of who my audience was when I wrote my papers. At the University of Karachi, I only wrote my papers for my teacher. My writings (at least, my writings in class) had not been intended for a wider audience and I could hardly imagine why they would ever be. This was because though my professors at the University of Karachi had emphasized repeatedly that our opinions were important, we were never expected to use an assertive tone in our papers to prove the validity of our own points. Not only would it have been in bad taste to assert that my reading was *the* valid reading of a given text, it would also have meant that I was asserting myself to my audience, my teacher, which was inconceivable to me.

Islam lays great emphasis on the status of the teacher in society, and the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) compared a person's teacher to their own father—and so worthy of utmost respect. As schoolchildren, we had been taught to stand when our teachers entered the classroom, and always to address them with respect as "Sir," "Madam" or "Miss." Even at the university, where we were no longer expected to stand for our professors, we demonstrated our respect to them by listening quietly to what they had to say. And lest this is giving the impression that this was a very autocratic, oppressive classroom situation, I should immediately say that we also *spoke* our opinions, but always in a respectful, non-assertive tone.

Here at the University of Houston though, I learned that my research papers were supposed to be intended for an audience wider than only my teacher, because it was supposed to be part of an ongoing conversation within the discipline. I also learned that I would have to assert my points for them to relay my conviction of their truth. While extensive reading of scholarly articles had also been part of the curriculum in my Masters at the University of Karachi, we had been taught to refer to them to reinforce our own points, and occasionally if we had a different opinion than the scholars. It had never crossed my mind at least, that all of the published work I had read in Karachi, had been written as part of a continuing conversation. So when I wrote

research papers for my seminars here at UH, I could make connections and cite appropriately, but I would fail to situate myself within a conversation. The introductions to my papers were what one of my professors called "funnel introductions," which began with a broad generalization and then narrowed down to the topic on hand. This could have been seen as a lack of focus to the American reader, but for me, I was following what I had been taught to do, by gradually introducing the subject instead of jumping directly into what I had to say. My trips and falls must have been seen as clumsiness on my part, while the truth was that I was relearning to walk.

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This is what I was thinking when I began a survey with freshman students this semester. I chose students who were in the mainstream freshman composition courses instead of in ESL classes, because I wanted to know about the experiences of students who were fluent in the English language but who might come from diverse backgrounds. I did this because studies have suggested that fluency in a language does not necessarily indicate an understanding of writing conventions associated with that language within a certain culture (Kaplan). The student sample was a diverse one, with students who self-identified as Hispanic-American, White, African-American, Vietnamese-American, Pakistani-American, and Indian-American, among others. Based on the initial data, Muslim South Asian students were only a small fraction of the sample.

In a question in which students were asked about who they considered the audience of their assignments, almost half responded that they viewed the teacher as their primary audience. At the same time though, many stated that they felt this restricted their writing style. The other half stated that they either didn't consider the audience, or thought of the audience as their peers, or the general public. And perhaps even more interestingly, no correlation could be found between the responses and the students' cultural and religious backgrounds.

On the other hand, in a question about reading practices, students were asked to indicate what they felt to be the problem if they had difficulty understanding something. Contrary to what I had expected, initial results suggest that the majority of these students (of various cultural backgrounds) considered that they were not reading carefully enough. Again, no correlation could be found between their background and their reading practices.

These initial results are surprising, even if the survey is ongoing, but I think there several reasons behind this. For one, my experiences were those of a graduate student, and the respondents here were undergraduates. Also, over 85% of these students were those who have already been in the American academic system for more than eight years. In cases such as these, where the students have already been in the system for a long time, I think there are fewer chances of their reverting to old practices, if they belong to one. And lastly, it could also be because of the survey questions themselves, which may have been worded vaguely. Whatever is the case, my initial results have indicated results which were very surprising, and contrary to my expectations.

In conclusion, I will reiterate that it is important to place students' writings in their social context. This understanding of social context will be beneficial to the teacher, as well as to the student, because it will hopefully make communication easier between the two.

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