

Fear And Prejudice Not The Keys To Fighting The Virus

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BIKRAM VOHRA

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The law of diminishing returns kicks in regardless of the enormity of the crisis.

The current attention on the coronavirus shifts from deep and collective concern to a sort of shunning of the authentic information being imparted and relief being found in memes and a surge in examples of humour in poor taste doing the rounds on the social media platforms.

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If you use the universal application of six degrees of separation covering all of us, it is simple to conclude that isolating ourselves from anyone who hails from China and lives here is absurd. The virus incubates for two weeks max so anyone who has been here that long is no risk to anybody else.

In fact, one of the ironies is that now non-Chinese people could be unwitting carriers with cases in 26 countries and the travel of the ones they have interacted with globally unrestricted.

But there is one issue that needs attention.

Now, children can be very



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cruel and they learn from the indiscretions of their parents. Be careful what you say and do not lose perspective. If your child hears your irrational remarks he will carry it to class and say something truly hurtful to a child from China. In the West, there are now many stories of Chinese school-children being bullied. Thankfully, we are much better off here and xenophobia is still low but it should not be fanned.

Now, while it may not be racist

and more out of self-preservation it is not pleasant and it is not valid either medically or in the prism of plain common sense.

Also remember that the virus has not gone away and spreading half-truths or unnecessarily avoiding certain places in a kind of mental boycott borders on the absurd. The public has a role and it has to be a role that is supportive of the efforts by the authorities to contain the risk factor and bring it down to practically zero.

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So, do not say something like 'avoid Chinese food' and believe you are being clever. In France, for example, the highest selling T shirts says #JeNeSuisPasUnVirus, meaning "I am not a virus." The idea is to tamp down on racist isolation.

Yes, you will read about acts of racism from different parts of the world. It is not new. We saw it with SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome), we saw it with Ebola. Disease tends to generate fear and scapegoating and can be very hurtful. Whenever I have read about someone displaying ignorance and pointing fingers I am reminded of the Bangladeshi woman who has refused to leave Wuhan on the grounds that if she is infected she will endanger her family at home and be party to the spread. So, she is staying back. That is the spirit.

Remember that we are all in the same boat. It is no one's fault and blame is a waste of energy. The idea is to be smart, wear masks, sanitise your hands frequently, be aware of the fact that clinics and hospital waiting rooms can be dicey and yes, if you feel you have any of the symptoms go to the doctor and remember, the odds favour you astronomically.

Together we can get past this.

Khaleej Times

This Is The Book That Lovers Of Urdu-Literature Needed,To Understand Its History

RANA SAFVI

*“Kya kahiye kya rakhein hain hum tujhse, yaar khvaahish
Yakjaan, sad tamanna – yak dil hazaar khvaahish”
“My love, I cannot tell the tale of all the things I want from you.
A hundred longings fill my soul, a thousand yearnings throng my heart.”
— Mir Taqi Mir*

Of late there has been a renewed interest in Urdu thanks to the internet. Although many (at least in India) are not conversant with the Urdu script, thanks to ghazals and Hindi film songs most understand and appreciate Urdu poetry written in Roman or Devnagari.

Many books of Urdu poetry were written in Roman and Devnagari with the meanings of the tough words given in footnotes, and some books even giving English translations. A generation of Urdu poetry lovers grew up on those. Now of course it's all available on the net on various blogs and websites. Saadat Hasan Manto and Ismat Chughtai have also been transliterated in Devnagari or translated into English and become very popular.

However, not many reader friendly books have been written on Urdu poetry and prose. Many masterly academic papers remained in the realms of academia and did not percolate down to non-academic readers. So while we hear Ghulam Ali, Jagjit Singh and Mehdi Hasan often, we may not really understand the symbolism that is such an integral part of their songs. For this, we need reader-friendly books written for just such an audience.

An Urdu syllabus

Even though I have grown up hearing many of these stories and verses I found A Thousand Yearnings to be an entire course curriculum on Urdu poetry and prose. Of course there are gaps, but then teachers can't do all the work, and once pointed in the right direction, we have to do our homework too.

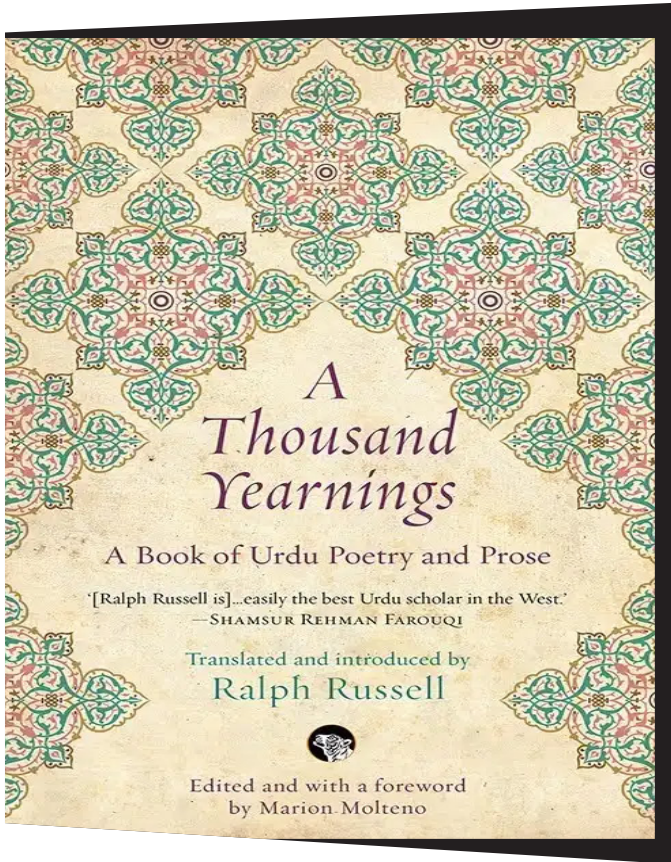
Ralph Russell, who headed the Urdu department at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London for thirty years, is one such teacher. He has written many books on Ghalib and Urdu literature and, as the cover blurb by Shamsur Rehman Faruqi says, “[Ralph Russell] is easily the best Urdu scholar in the west.”

Russell, along with Marion Molteno, his student and friend, arranged his extensive notes, that were published as two separate books. The first, The Pursuit of Urdu Literature: A Select History, was published in 1993, followed by Hidden In The Lute: An Anthology Of Two Centuries Of Urdu Literature, in 1995. I found the titles of the two editions very poetic, with Hidden in the Lute being after a verse by Ghalib.

The book under review, A Thousand Yearnings – named after a verse by Mir – is an edited version of Hidden in the Lute. Molteno describes how Russell helped her discover Urdu and found in her the “ideal audience” – the kind of person who would be interested in Urdu literature but could do it only through translations.

That is the USP of the book. It talks to an audience which, though interested in the writings of the era that began in the 19th century and ended in the 20th century with the beginning of the Progressive Writers Movement, does not understand all the cultural and literary nuances. Russell explains those nuances.

The book starts with seven short stories, with the translator explaining the evolution of short stories in Urdu literature. It's interesting that he has included Premchand's “A Wife's Complaint”, written in Urdu as “Shikva Shikayat”. Today many are unaware that Premchand started writing in Urdu, switching to Hindi later because it was commercially more viable.



A Thousand Yearnings: A Book of Urdu Poetry and Prose, Translated and introduced by Ralph Russell, Edited and with a foreword by Marion Molteno, Speaking Tiger Books.

These are Russell's personal selection and some of them, especially Chughtai's sketch of her brother Azim Beg Chughtai in “Hellbound” (“Dozakh”) are very unusual and intriguing. Some, like Rashid Jahan's “Behind The Veil” (“Parde Ke Peeche”) and Manto's “Kali Shalwar” are very popular. The translations are fluid and impeccable.

Of course, the stories of Manto and Chughtai were a no-no in genteel houses, so I read them very recently. Fifty years ago when my aunt and sister, who were interested in improving their Urdu reading skills, went to a bookshop in Lucknow and asked for a Chughtai novel, they were told, “Bibi, girls from sharif (genteel) families don't read such books.”

Abashed, they came back empty handed. In fact the most suitable Urdu book for young Muslim ladies was supposed to be “Bahisti Zevar” by Maulana Ashraf Aki Thanvi, a regressive book by today's standards that was a guide to religion and the religious duties of Muslim girls. It was gifted to young brides as a bible by which to conduct their lives.

Legends and love stories

Having grown up hearing stories of Sheikh Chilli, Mullah Dopiazza and folklore, I was enthralled by the popular literature section, as most of its contents were new to me.

Urdu poetry has many references to prophets and saints and their miracles. So the explanations from famous men will come in handy for the lay reader. I don't know from which source Russell took the story of Adam and Eve because it is at variance to the one in the Quran, where both share the blame of temptation and are supposed to have erred together. Unlike western literature, Eve alone was not held responsible for the original sin. I suppose, as in all things, patriarchy throws its shadow on Urdu literature as well, where Eve tempts Adam with wine to eat the grain of wheat, which she has already consumed.

It is the section on “Love Poetry” that intoxicates one's senses with the beauty of Urdu poetry. It's a master class on it, in fact, detailing the nuances of mystic poetry, the challenge to orthodoxy, the humanist values of a ghazal, and the images and allusions it contains.

Those who enjoy Ghalib and Mir – and I must confess the latter is my favorite – will love the comparison Russell draws between their love poetries, with wonderful translations. With beautiful examples Russell proves how Mir was a committed lover whose love could be classified as junoon (madness), but Ghalib held back. He had reservations, was unwilling to commit wholeheartedly, and his love was just love, not madness.

While Mir writes:

*“Guzar jaan se aur dar kuchh nahin
Rah eishq mein phir khatar kuchh nahin”
“Just sacrifice your life and fear is banished
Go on your way; all danger will have vanished”*

Ghalib writes:

*“Yehi hai aazmaana to sataana kis ko kehte hain?
Adu ke ho liye jab tum to mera imtihaan kyon ho?”
“If this is testing, can you tell me, what would persecution be?”*

If it was to him you gave your heart; what would you want with testing me?”

I am no expert on Urdu poetry but I have always felt that Ghalib held back something: his poetry was often aimed at the intellect and not the heart. Given this, I feel the chapter on Ghalib's personal philosophy is very apt as it explains much of his writings for the lay reader. One valuable aspect of the book is the section on the lives of poets, as well as the one with Ghalib's letters, which offer insights into their life and times.

Most books on Urdu poetry and prose tend to ignore the change that came after the failed war of independence in 1857. Russell describes Sir Saiyyad Ahmed Khan, the Aligarh Movement, and the satirical poetry of Akbar Lahbadi in the political and cultural atmosphere of that era.

For some reason he has left out the hugely popular people's poet Nazir Akbarabadi (1735–1830) whose verses give a glimpse of the people and their lives in that era. Russell also leaves out another very popular Urdu poet, Sir Mohammad Iqbal, popularly known as the shayer e mashriq or poet of the east, as he feels that Iqbal's appeal was only to Muslims.

Today, when we have so many issues of blasphemy and religious feelings are easily hurt, Iqbal's Shikwa and Jawab e Shikwa should be made compulsory reading. Apart from this, Iqbal had a body of socialist poetry as well as secular verses on Ram and on Guru Nanak, while his Tarana e Hind is still sung in schools. His Naya Shivala is an ode to syncretism.

The book, which also includes selections from Farhatullah Beg's Dilli ka Aakhiri Mushaira and Rusva's novel Umrao Jaan Ada, is truly worth reading as it traces the history and evolution of Urdu poetry and prose, using a rich variety of selections to capture the particular milieu of the era.

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