Good Words, Corrupt Words, and Publishing Etiquette

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Abstract

Adhering to the demands of integrity and having research attitudes rooted in moral sensibilities are of paramount importance for academics, researchers, and writers. Publishing etiquette requires them to invest adequate time and energy in conducting research and writing manuscripts and thus to produce beneficial knowledge. Putting together a document hastily and avoiding the much-needed effort in research and writing lead to negative outcomes. The corrupt practice of plagiarism and the desire for recognition through fraudulent and duplicitous publications are marked by deliberate deceptiveness. It debases the plagiarists, stagnates their intellectual growth, and vitiates the academic environment. Highlighting this observation, in this essay I shall discuss some dimensions and significance of publishing etiquette. I shall argue that attitudes and behaviours of researchers and academic practitioners determine the quality of the words and works that they produce.

Keywords

Introduction: Writing and the human urge for permanence

The early modern English philosopher and statesman Francis Bacon (1561–1626) is considered to have been the most learned man of his age. His *The Advancement of Learning* (1893/1605) contains a map of knowledge and a systematic outline of his approach to learning. It provides "a survey of the different branches of knowledge, their relations to each other and their relations to the faculties of the human mind" (Anstey 18). In the book, Bacon discusses the benefits of acquiring and exercising knowledge and regards it as a source of pleasure and virtuous leisure and as a way to eliminate ignorance and to keep

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anxiety at bay. He states that "there is no vexation or anxiety of mind which resulteth from knowledge otherwise than merely by accident; for all knowledge and wonder ([curiosity] which is the seed of knowledge) is an impression of pleasure in itself" (Bacon 16).

Islam gives prominence to knowledge and learning per se. The first divine revelation that Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is believed to have received from God came in the form of an instruction to read, that is, to acquire knowledge (Qur'an 96:1-5). The Qur'an states that God favoured and enlightened all prophets with the gift of knowledge (Qur'an 2:251, 3:48, 12:37, and 18:65-66). Therefore, like Francis Bacon, innumerable Islamic scholars of the past and present have highlighted and championed the enduring virtues of knowledge.

In *The Advancement of Learning*, the English renaissance scholar and essayist also elaborates on the values and benefits of knowledge production. Most human beings, especially authors and scholars, fear oblivion and search for permanence after death. Accordingly, Bacon identifies "immortality and continuance" as the chief goal to which "man's nature doth most aspire" (59). He provides a list of activities in which human beings engage to accomplish this goal of permanence. They include "generation [procreation], and rising of houses and families[,] … buildings, foundations, and monuments" (Bacon 59). However, Bacon claims that the most secure means of preventing oblivion and gaining immortality is to produce quality knowledge, making it available in published form. He adds:

> We see, then, how far the monuments of wit and learning are more durable than the monuments of power or of the hands. For have not the verses of Homer continued twenty-five hundred years, or more, without the loss of a syllable or letter; during which time infinite palaces, temples, castles, cities, have been decayed and demolished? (Bacon 59)

Bacon divides human endeavours – designed to avoid falling into oblivion – into spheres of brain and brawn activity. He maintains that "the monuments of wit and learning" including books and other products of the human intellect last longer than man-made structures which are largely the outcomes of bodily functions. The evidence Bacon provides to drive home this argument is incontrovertible.

If we count back from now, Homer wrote *Iliad* and *Odyssey* roughly three thousand years ago; but he and his works are still studied at universities and beyond and will continue to be read for generations to come. In the Islamic intellectual tradition, there are authors who compiled or produced knowledge centuries and millennia back, and their works have remained intact and have been

consulted by people in different parts of the world. For example, Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari (810–70) compiled his collection of traditions attributed to Prophet Muhammad in the 9th century. Known as *Sahih Bukhari*, the book is still found to be valuable by scholars as well as readers in the wider public. It is discussed and admired and used as a reference and a required text worldwide.

At International Islamic University Malaysia, I teach a course now renamed Islamic Literature in English. It features authors like Ibn Hazm (994–1064) and Jalaluddin Muhammad Rumi (1207–73) who wrote in the eleventh and thirteenth centuries respectively. Their words and works have been reprinted in innumerable publications. They have not been forgotten and are still being discussed, as their writings are documented, treasured, distributed, deliberated, cited, and quoted in the academia and the wider society.

The key to the relative immortality of such writers is their intellectual work characterised by their curiosities, mental energies, and cerebral diligence. Shaped by their aesthetic qualities and matched by their intellectual rigour, their writings bear the unmistakable marks of their creative abilities and the lofty ideals that inspired them to write. The success of these and many other past writers – whose works have survived their mortal lives and continue to be celebrated – is also measured by the assiduity and care that they showed in writing. I trust their exquisite works will continue to bring their authors closer to readers and will go on to be studied and reflected upon by future bibliophiles. In short, the longevity of the survival of written works is determined by how good and impactful they are. This leads the discussion to the Qur'anic concept of good words and to writers' moral obligation to produce useful knowledge, which the following section explores in more detail.

Good words

A splendid piece of useful work or publication can be compared to what the Qur'an terms "a good word." It declares:

> Are you not aware how God sets forth the parable of a good word? [It is] like a good tree, firmly rooted, [reaching out] with its branches towards the sky, yielding its fruit at all times by its Sustainer's leave. And [thus it is that] God propounds parables unto men, so that they might bethink themselves [of the truth]. (Qur'an, 14:24-25; trans. Asad 450)

In his English translation and commentary of the Qur'an, *The Message of the Qur'an*, the journalist, diplomat, and great Qur'anic exegete Muhammad Asad (formerly Leopold Weiss) comments on the Arabic term *kalimatun tayyibatun* (good word) that appears in the Qur'an (14:24). He notes: "In its wider meaning, the term *kalimah* (word) denotes any conceptual statement or proposition. Thus, a 'good

word' circumscribes any proposition (or idea) that is intrinsically true and … is ultimately beneficent and *enduring*" (Asad 450 [emphasis mine]). In my opinion, what makes a word or work good and enduring is not only its content but also its form, technique, linguistic aspects, and inherent organisational structure. If a piece of work is good, both content-wise and stylistically, it will have a powerful effect and be longer lasting.

I am sure all those who write and submit their manuscripts to *Asiatic* and other journals believe that they have a good argument or persuasive proposition to make or a bad one to refute. In order to make their writing effective and enduring, it is important that they put maximum effort into articulating their ideas clearly and producing manuscripts that are informative, insightful, and well-written. Botched and half-hearted attempts at writing may not make a piece of work clear, compelling, and convincing. It is therefore a complete waste of energy and effort to produce a half-baked, poor-quality manuscript and then submit it to a journal – all of which most likely lead to a rejection outcome. Therefore, the following discussion focusses on what makes a piece of writing bad and corrupt.

Corrupt words

Apart from good words previously discussed, the Qur'an talks about "a corrupt word," stating: "And the parable of a corrupt word is that of a corrupt tree, torn up [from its roots] onto the face of the earth, *wholly unable to endure*" (Qur'an 14:26; trans. Asad 450 [italics mine]). This Quranic statement can be related to writings and published works of risqué or disreputable contents, or to producing kitsch or garish and overly sentimental and insincere products. Such research and writing pursuits generally lead to the dirtiness of junk or pulp reading materials. In this group of writing, I would also include superficial, superfluous, or plagiarised writings that bear witness to their authors' inadequacy, insincerity, and/or fraudulent behaviour.

Therefore, it is important to remember that a piece of well-written, scholarly, and sincere work remains a treasure of extensive knowledge and abundant good for readers, as it is a source of pleasure and inspiration for its author/s. At the same time, a poorly-written, rushed, redundant, plagiarised, fabricated, falsified, or deceptive writing can be a source of harm to its audience and of shame to its stated author/s. In some cases, the words or writings are corrupt because of the content and message they convey, while in other cases such as plagiarism and research/authorship fraud,[2] the authors are riddled with deceit and other unethical conducts.

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[2] For a detailed discussion on authorship fraud, please see Md. Mahmudul Hasan, "Manuscript Quality, Authorship Fraud, and Other Issues" (2022).

Notably, about the corrupt words, the Qur'an uses the phrases "torn up [from its roots] onto the face of the earth" and "having no perman[e]nce (*qarār*) whatever" (Asad 450). The first phrase refers to shallowness and lack of depth and substance and the second one, to the abrupt, limited, or transitory impact or no impact of such works. Muhammad Asad maintains that "the 'corrupt word' … is ephemeral in its effect, however strong its original impact on the minds of people who fall prey to it" (450). Authors of such works may derive temporary pleasure, complacency, self-satisfaction, and recognition from such publications, but – owing to intrinsic deficiencies – their products may not pass the test of time. Nor will they stand the chance of reaching the status of scholarly immortality. The English playwright William Shakespeare (1564–1616) has an interesting take on this issue.

"Words, words, words"

The Qur'anic concept of corrupt words can be considered in relation to William Shakespeare's use of "words, words, words" in Act II, Scene ii of his tragic play *Hamlet* (1599–1601). In the story, the courtier, intriguer, and fool Polonius asks Hamlet, "What do you read, my lord?" The beleaguered prince makes an equivocal reply, saying: "Words, words, words." The dialogue between Hamlet and Polonius continues thus:

> Polonius: What is the matter, my lord?
> Hamlet: Between who?
> Polonius: I mean, the matter that you read, my lord.
> Hamlet: Slanders, sir: for the satirical rogue says here that old men have grey beards….
> Polonius: (*aside*) Though this be madness, yet there is method in't.
> (*Hamlet*, Act II, Scene ii, ll. 195-208)

When pushed by Polonius to elaborate, Hamlet associates the words he was apparently reading with "slanders." The term word and its plural form appear 33 times in *Hamlet*, as the "play is filled with examples of the unreliability of words" (Norford 562). One fantastic takeaway from this Shakespearean masterpiece is the importance of differentiating between sincere and insincere words, between genuine and spurious words, and between reliable and deceptive words. Accordingly, the main thrust of my argument in this essay is to make a case for decent, impactful, clear, well-crafted, and readable manuscripts and to deplore and deprecate the self-defeatist behaviour of producing subpar works that lack originality and artistic merit. This is closely related to the scourge of plagiarism which the following discussion examines.

Plagiarism and hypocrisy

All professional, thoughtful, and hardworking academics detest the deceitful tendency of thieving words or works of others and publishing them as one's own. In a 1978 work, long before plagiarism became a frequent form of academic misconduct, the Malaysian polymath Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas said: "[P]lagiarists and pretenders as well as ignorant imitators affect great mischief by debasing values, imposing upon the ignorant, and encouraging the rise of mediocrity. They appropriate original ideas for hasty implementation and make false claims for themselves" (xii). He argues that "justice implies knowledge, which also means that knowledge is prior to justice" (al-Attas 149). Therefore, if the urge to publish is embroiled in sleaze and corruption, the "knowledge" thus produced loses its meaning and distinction. Al-Attas equates such misconducts and corruptions in the field of knowledge production with the behaviour of the hypocrite that "when he speaks, he lies; and when he promises, he breaks the promise; and when he is entrusted with something he betrays the trust" (165-66). Interestingly, describing the character traits of hypocrites, the Qur'an (3:188) states:

> Think not that those who exult in what they have thus contrived, and who *love to be praised for what they have not done* – think not that they will escape suffering: for grievous suffering does await them [in the life to come]. (trans. Asad 118 [italics mine])

At the core of the plagiaristic tendency is a longing to be praised or recognised for a feigned, sham achievement – for a written piece the content of which one has stolen from various unacknowledged sources. As Scott McGill states:

> [P]lagiarists seek to earn credit for having written something and, thus, to gain recognition as well as to boost their reputations and status. Charges of plagiarizing allege that an author does not deserve the credit he endeavors to win and/or has won from other audience members. (28)

The main reason for plagiarism among students is the desire to achieve higher grades that they do not deserve. Among academics and others, it is the intention to receive accolades and recognition from friends and colleagues, or success and achievements at workplace. That is to say, they want to be showered with praise for writings they have not written themselves. What follows contains an example of plagiarism.

Of being a victim of plagiarism

In 2012, my long essay "Feminism as Islamophobia: A review of misogyny charges against Islam" appeared in *Intellectual Discourse*, one of the journals published by International Islamic University Malaysia. Recently, I have noticed that someone presumably from a North African country slightly changed the title to "Feminism and Islamophobia" (publication date 2020) and reproduced much

of my article including quotations and references without any acknowledgment whatsoever. The putative author's act of intellectual theft does not bite or harm me in a real sense. It betrays the corrupt and degenerate nature of the person who is involved in this thievery. Perhaps there are other plagiarists who have lifted sections of my books and articles.

The crime of plagiarism becomes more revolting and doubly intolerable when one is involved in this academic dishonesty and, at the same time, apparently seeks to promote an Islamic cause. Attempting to spread the teachings of Islam in such deceitful ways is simply untenable. In this respect, al-Attas says:

> Our great and God-fearing predecessors of astute vision and profound intellectual and spiritual depth have laboured in terms of centuries to build splendid systems of thought and action with God's help and guidance, and if we are even to hope to rise to the same expectation, then we must humbly emulate their example. (167)

Works of early scholars – both Muslim and non-Muslim – that have received wider recognition are both meaningful and impactful. We read them because of their scholarly merit and because they bear the marks of the intellectual assiduity and competence of their authors. We cannot be their worthy successors and be part of the continuing intellectual legacy if we are not ready to conduct rigorous research and are susceptible to the plague of incompetence and pernicious publication practices.

Conclusion

Recently, there have been concerns that artificial intelligence (AI) poses credible, existential threats to the human race and that it may render many professionals redundant. I am not qualified to provide expert opinions on the complex issues of AI or to give definitive answers to its problems. When I look at the academic world as a researcher and editor, it seems to me that many practitioners of my trade may become redundant in a practical sense – not necessarily employment-wise – because of their lack of commitment to scholarship and to superior publication. Their lack of seriousness and the inferior research stemming from their refusal to work hard are worrying. Their inadequate understanding of academic writing and preference for shortcut ways are simply shocking. Many are desperately ambitious to achieve the honour of being an author and to quickly enhance their publication records, but refuse to conduct research with patience and perseverance. Such tendencies lead them to rush and produce poor quality works or to resort to the lazy and plagiaristic copy-and-paste behaviour. Sincerity and hard work may not always guarantee success, but the lack thereof is indefensible and discredits the integrity of academic practice.

On a final note, academics should all have self-esteem as an essential ingredient of personality. Deficient works or plagiarised materials which carry their names to various locations – be they offline or online – have the potential to ruin their reputation. The damage is also extended to the standing of the institutions with which they are affiliated. One of the best ways that an academic can promote their employing university is to publish solid, scholarly, and stimulating works; at the same time, one of the worst ways that they can demean it is to print under their names poor-quality research and substandard pieces tainted by incompetence, insincerity, and unethical behaviour.

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