

Rethinking
Literacy
through the
Qur'an:

Shifting Definitions
and Global Realities

Rethinking Literacy through the Qur'an

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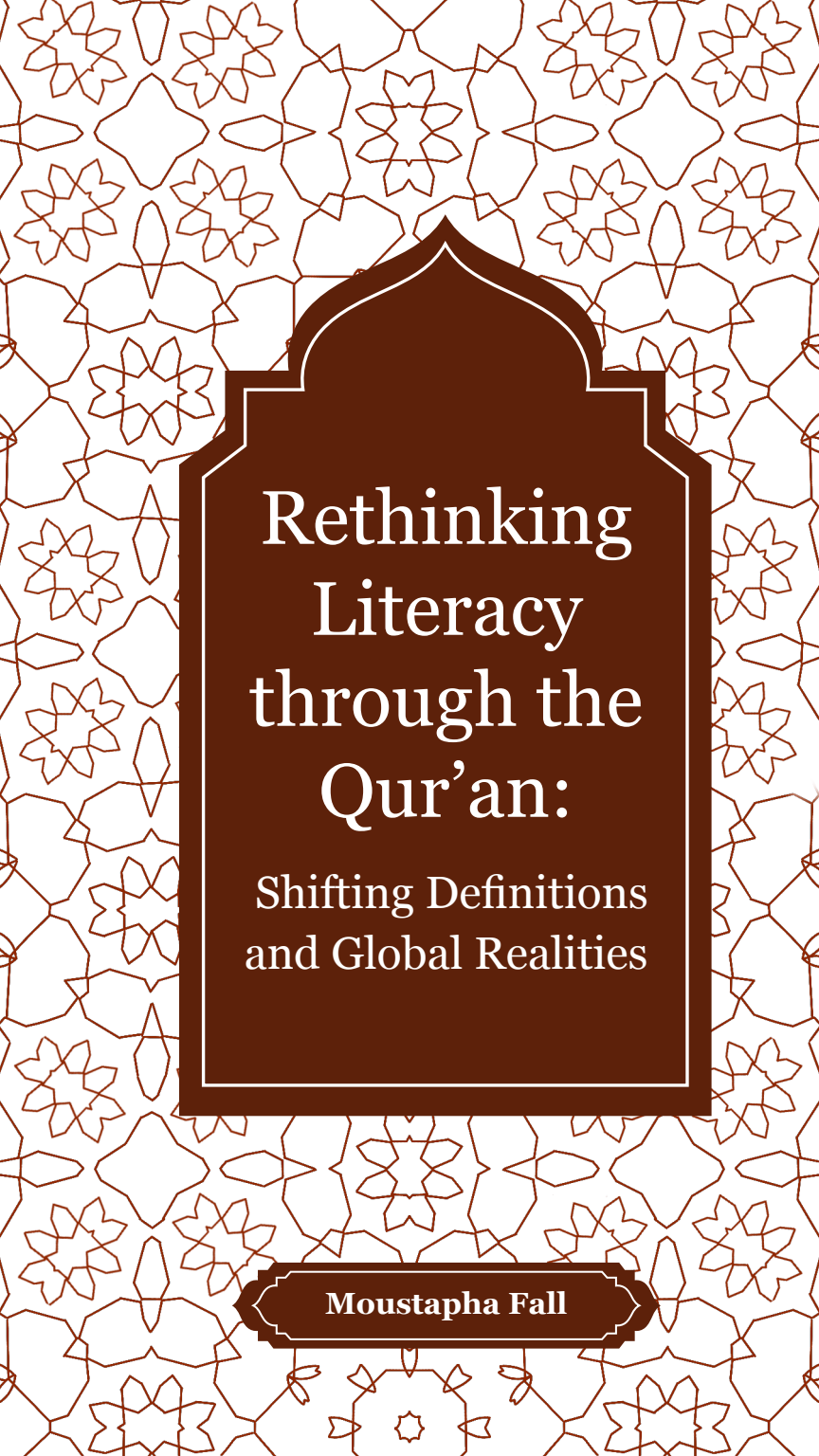
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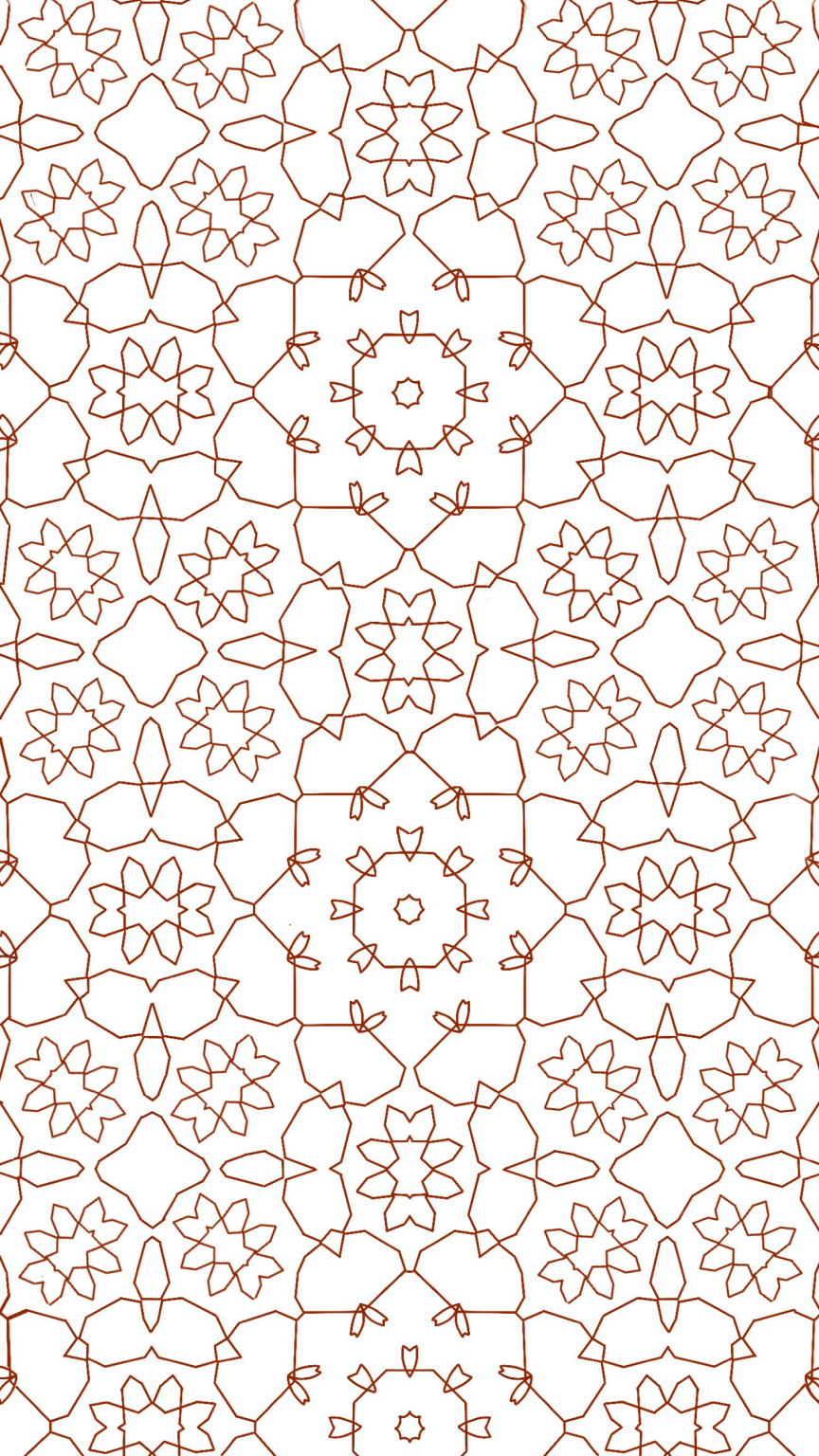
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Moustapha Fall



Introduction

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, literacy has emerged as a major global concern. While there is significant variation in both the distribution and degree of literacy across different countries, extensive research has consistently underscored the vital importance of literacy and the far-reaching consequences of illiteracy. However, it is essential to recognize that literacy is defined in numerous ways, often shaped by specific cultural contexts, power dynamics, and ideologies. For instance, the Australian Curriculum defines literacy as involving “students listening to, reading, viewing, speaking, writing and creating oral, print, visual and digital texts, and using and modifying language for different purposes in a range of contexts” (Agence Nationale de la Statistique et de la Démographie., 2022)

In contemporary discourse, the concept of literacy has expanded to encompass not just the ability to read and write but also the skills required for tasks involving digital media, such as computer literacy. This broader interpretation implies that literacy has always been associated with print. Nevertheless, a small but growing body of research is exploring whether communities that lack a formal writing system, yet rely on oral languages for communication, should be considered

illiterate. Some scholars argue that literacy is not confined to reading and writing but also includes mastery of spoken language. This perspective challenges earlier, more narrow conceptions of literacy, which were grounded solely in print knowledge or familiarity with literature. As the very definition of literacy continues to provoke debate, its role and function have sparked critical discussions across various interdisciplinary fields.

In the realm of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), scholars have shown growing interest in understanding the relationship between first language literacy and second language learning. Linguistic minority communities often face the complex challenge of communicating in a dominant majority language environment without fully leveraging the linguistic resources of their mother tongue. Observational evidence suggests that learners' performance in a second language (L2) is significantly influenced by their proficiency in one or more languages already in use. This influence is evident in learners' accents, pronunciation, and writing, which frequently carry traces of their first language's phonology or syntax. In majority-language contexts, the first language (L1) of L2 learners is often regarded as a potential source of either successful or unsuccessful transfer during L2 acquisition. The notion that L2 acquisition results, whether directly or

indirectly, from cross-linguistic transfer from the native language remains widely accepted within the SLA field. However, there exists a range of conflicting views regarding how and under what conditions this cross-linguistic transfer occurs during the process of learning or acquiring a new language.

To understand the underlying differences (or similarities) between these conflicting views, classroom teachers have been systematically recording contrastive observations about the languages their students already know and those they are learning. This approach, known as Contrastive Analysis (CA) in the field of SLA, has allowed researchers to examine second language acquisition as the potential result of either a “positive” or “negative” transfer of knowledge and concepts from the mother tongue. The assumption that the mother tongue plays a significant role in second language learning has sparked considerable interest within the field of Bilingual Education.

Jim Cummins, a leading figure in this field since the early 1980s, has established a clear connection between mother tongue literacy and second language learning. In his Developmental Interdependence Hypothesis (DIH), he argues that proficiency in first language (L1) reading plays a crucial role in second language (L2) reading, with L2 literacy skills dependent on L1 because the literacy

skills acquired in L1 transfer to L2. His research with Spanish-speaking children in the United States revealed a strong correlation between L1 reading in Spanish and L2 reading in English.

Further studies have supported Cummins' findings, showing that continued maintenance of L1 literacy, especially in reading, is essential for achieving higher levels of L2 competence. More than twenty-six studies have specifically reported that reading skills transfer from L1 to L2. Chapter 3 will delve into these studies, focusing on the concept of cross-linguistic transfer of reading skills to provide additional evidence on the relationship between mother-tongue literacy and second language learning. It is important to note, however, that while numerous empirical studies explore cross-linguistic transfer in situations where mother tongue literacy is developed before second language acquisition, there is limited research on how individuals who are illiterate in their mother tongue learn a second language. More specifically, there is a lack of research addressing the central question of whether the absence of literacy in the mother tongue hinders the development of literacy skills—such as decoding and reading comprehension—in a second language. For example, how does a child's early exposure to print material at home influence their phonological awareness, decoding skills, and

reading comprehension at school? To what extent can an L1- illiterate child achieve phonological awareness, decoding skills, and reading comprehension in L2 compared to an L1-literate child learning an L2? And what impact does further exposure to reading practice in French as an L2 have on a child's overall phonological awareness, decoding skills, and reading comprehension at school?

Although these questions may seem irrelevant to some communities, where children already develop literacy in their mother tongue prior to learning a second language, they are a pressing concern in post-independence African countries, like Senegal. In these countries, a foreign language often serves as the dominant medium of instruction in schools, to the detriment of the mother tongue. An overwhelming majority of Wolof children in Senegal do not read or write in their mother tongue (Wolof) when they begin learning French as a second language. Only a small minority of them develop their first literacy skills in Arabic through Qur'anic schooling before learning French.

