

WHAT IS "ISLĀMIC" IN ISLĀMIC LITERATURE?

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The problem with which this paper is concerned is the definition of the term "Islāmic" when applied to literature. It is at the same time the problem of unity of the literatures of the Muslim peoples across the ages and continents. For various motives, scholars have debated whether such a thing as "Islāmic literature" exists; and their debates undermined the unity of the literatures of the Muslim peoples in many minds. The fact, however, remained that literature is an integral constituent of Islāmic civilization, inseparable from the religion of Islām which is at its base and inspiration. In the introduction to his *Anthology of Islamic Literature*, James Kritzeck wrote:

"A tremendous number of forms and styles are comprehended under so general a rubric as "Islamic Literature." At the same time, there is not only ample justification for, but a decided advantage in, approaching this immense body of literature as Islamic."

"Islāmic" here should not be understood as referring to nationality; nor to a set of specific characteristics of a literary movement or genre. Nor does it refer to the literature composed in any single language. Islāmic literature contains a wide variety of all of these. From the pious Abū al 'Atāhiyah of 'Irāq (d. 827) or the skeptic Abū al 'Alā' al Ma'arī of Syria (d. 1057) to their widely different contemporaries such as the dissolute Abū Nuwās and the mystic al Ḥallāj, a great number of poets and men of letters prospered and produced their excellent writings under the aegis of Islām. Surely, there was plenty of diversity. Islāmic

¹A paper to be presented at the Regional Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Drexel University, Philadelphia, May 6-7, 1978.

literature can hardly be represented by any fixed number of authors or works, no matter how great that number may be. And yet, in spite of this heterogeneity of works and ideas, of authors and languages, this literature presents us with unmistakable unity. This unity is the theme of this session, and the concern of this paper.

I. Unity in Language

The compilation of the *Shanameh*,² a fiercely patriotic epic in Persian written by the Persian poet Firdawsī in 1010, marks a major change in the attitude of Muslim Persia. In this work, Firdawsī tried to revive and preserve the Persian native tongue. He deliberately avoided the use of Arabic vocabulary which had flooded the Persian language, and substituted Persian words for them whenever possible. With such an attitude, Firdawsī turned, or at least helped to turn, the balance away from an Arabic language dominance over Persian. During the three centuries of dominance which had preceded him, Arabic, in addition to flooding Persian with its vocabulary, had altered that language as a medium for all literary expression. Arabic became linked with all Qur'ānic studies, and hence, with "religiosity." Al Tha'ālibī, the great grammarian (d. 1039), said that "whoever loves God ... loves His Prophet Muḥammad ... And whoever loves Muḥammad ... loves the Arabs ... and whoever loves the Arabs loves Arabic."³ This connection between Arabic and "Islāmicity" made by a non-Arab was and remained to a large extent a typical view held by those who tried to defend their use of Arabic against attack from any source.

The opponents of al Tha'ālibī may have contended that although it is legitimate and desirable for the non-Arabs to worship in Arabic, it should be equally legitimate for them to express themselves literarily in the vernacular tongue. Even if they did not know any Arabic at all, it was still illegitimate to question their Islāmicity or religiosity on the ground that they were unable to express themselves in Arabic alone. This view was unacceptable by the proponents of Arabic, because, they argued, mastery of the language of worship is at the same time the understanding of Islāmīc ethics and culture. Without it, the Muslim can hardly be religious, or Islāmīcally successful. He can hardly participate constructively in the thought, culture and civilization of Islām.

Another view which was expressed around the same time may be more practical here. Al Bīrūnī (d. 1048), for instance, a distinguished Persian scholar and a contemporary of al Tha'ālibī who must have

² *Anthology of Islamic Literature*, ed. James Kritzeck, New York: Holt and Rinehart, 1964, p. 4.

³ *Shanameh*, begun by Dāgīgi but always attributed to Firdawsī, who completed the text.

witnessed the birth of the *Shahnameh*, spoke of the capacity of Arabic to carry out translations of science from all over the world. Those translations, he said, “have been embellished, instituting themselves into our hearts. And beauties of this language have circulated with them in our arteries and in our veins.” Al Bīrūnī went further to affirm an absolutely favorable and prior status to Arabic when he said:

“... If I compare Arabic and Persian, two languages with which I am familiar and in which I am exercised, I confess to preferring to be insulted in Arabic to being praised in Persian. And you will recognize the justice of my remark by examining what becomes of a scientific book once it is translated into Persian. It loses all éclat, its meaning is eclipsed, its features are obscured, its utility effaced.”⁴

Here al Bīrūnī was talking about “capabilities,” “features” and “beauties” of the Arabic language rather than its religious significance. He was certainly different in this approach from al Tha‘ālibī. Arabic, according to him, and regardless of its connection with the Qur’ān, with the Prophet Muḥammad (ṢAAS) and with Allah (SWT), is the “ideal” language in which a Muslim should hope and aspire to express himself. It follows from such an assumption that, through the *Shahnameh*, Persia not only succumbed to its local tongue, but to its ethnocentrism and parochialism — its *shu‘ūbiyyah*. However, even if Turkish, Urdu, Malay, Bengali, Punjabi, Swahili and many other languages became media of literary expression for Muslims in various parts of the world, it remains true that the Arabic language is the prime unifier in the multiplicity of the world’s Muslims.

II. Unity in Theme

“Unity” may be sought on another level of the literature of Muslims around the world, namely, in literary content or theme. Such unity may be difficult to find. Hardly any single literary theme, whether secular or religious, dominates the whole span of Muslim World Literature. Throughout history, Muslim writers engaged themselves in practically all subject matter. Nor can it be claimed that the Muslim writers were always committed to morals and the teachings of Islām. For instance, the Qur’ānic verses on poets⁵ were understood by Muslim critics as commending all poets “who have faith in God and perform the good works” (Qur’ān 26:227). It condemned only those who “did otherwise than they professed” and prostituted their talents for their patrons’

⁴Quoted from W. Bishai’s *Humanities in the Arabic Islamic World*, Dubuque, Iowa: WCB, 1973, p. 66.

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 66-76.

favor (26:224-26). This was interpreted as granting them permission to write what they wanted so long as they fulfilled the condition of being of those “who have faith in God and do the good works.”

In an earlier attempt to find “unity” in contemporary Arabic literature, it was possible to identify a number of common themes.

1) *Isrā’* and *Mi’rāj*, the journey and ascension of the Prophet Muḥammad (ṢAAS), his birthday, Ramaḍān (the month of fasting and moral stocktaking), and the Hijrah are all themes which bring a certain amount of “occasional” thematic unity. Men of letters in various countries respond enthusiastically to these occasions, and elaborate the conventional and common ideas which reflect common appreciation.

2) Muḥammad’s life (the *ṣīrah*) and his message (the *sunnah*) are often interpreted in both poetical and narrative literature. Here the person of Muḥammad (ṢAAS) was — and still is — the archetype overarching the whole range of the Muslim’s life and thought. His is the “ideal” image to be followed by the contemporary rebel, the conservative reactionary, the man-of-the-world and the mystic, all at once.

3) Because the Muslim World has generally been in a state of revolution, most poetical, narrative and theatrical writings have projected the ideal as the “rebel” fighting wrong-doing and injustice. Nonetheless, the image is ubiquitously that of a hero who is fully aware of his creaturely limits vis-à-vis the transcendent ultimate reality of God. Al Sayyāb, for instance, pushes his rebellious hero to question God with the words:

*“Do you hear
And hearing do you answer
... O hunter of men ... torturer!”*⁶

Immediately after this, the poet withdraws to a position of humble repentance before God with the following verses:

*“I want to sleep in your holy shrine
Beneath a blanket of sin and error
I want to behold you ... Yet who may see you?
I run to your great threshold.”*

Likewise, in *Ṭabliyah Min al Samā’*, (“A Banquet from Heaven”) by Yūsuf Idrīs,⁷ Shaykh ‘Alī, the main character, demands satisfaction *here* and *now*, instead of the promised honey and milk rivers of Paradise. He threatens to commit blasphemy unless God causes a fully

⁶Qur’ān 26:224-27.

⁷Story was analyzed in my doctoral dissertation presented to Temple University, Department of Religion, Philadelphia, 1976, under the chapter entitled “Image of the Contemporary Existentialists.”

laden table to descend upon him from heaven. In the play, he shakes his stick at heaven and says: "I will say it ... unless you send me right now a banquet like that which You sent down to Jesus and Mary." But he never fulfills his threat. And the spectator (or reader) is left with the impression that Shaykh 'Alī had second thoughts about carrying out his threat.

We may therefore conclude that:

1) All Muslim writers are consistently conscious of the distinction of heaven from earth, of the Creator from the created, and were always prone to avoiding to transcend the limits imposed by those distinctions.

2) They tend more to "societism" than to "individualism"; to world- and life-affirmation rather than to denial; to rationalism rather than to dogmatism.

3) The either stretch the concept of the "religious" to include the "secular" or justify the "secular" by basing it upon the "religious," thus rejecting any ultimate separation of the two.

4) Finally, they prefer *jihād* and militancy to escape in mysticism, despair in cynicism, or Promethan self-apotheosis in tragedy and death.

With all these features, one can justifiably say that there is certainly an "Islāmic awareness" on the thematic level of Muslim World literature. Alone, however, thematic and ideological unity may not fully support the quest for unity. More is needed; but this is not wanting.

III. Unity in Aesthetic Philosophy

After all, the quality which on one hand distinguishes literature from all other verbal expressions and, on the other, links it with other expressions of artistic nature, is its aesthetic philosophy. Every work of literature embodies the aesthetic principles of the culture. There is hardly a philosophy of life or religion that has not determined the aesthetic stance of its adherents. Theories of ultimate reality, of the origin and purpose of life, of human destiny and meaning, affect the sense of beauty in deep ways. Aesthetics is integral to religion and inseparable from it. It is here that the unity of Islāmic literature ultimately rests.

Islāmic aesthetics, whether it is applied in literature, or in the visual arts, or in the arts of sound, consists of the following principles:

1) The work of art consists of units which are autonomous, complete in themselves, and stylized to perfection. Beholding them through the senses is always a pleasurable experience.

2) These units consist of one or more structures; but they are always repeated — in most cases symmetrically — to form a pattern.

3) The order of repetition of the units in a pattern is never developmental so that its beginning is never known, and its ending is never expected or reached.

4) A pattern is a field of vision or perception, arbitrarily delineated for the purpose of presentation. The boundaries of the material object of art are never those of the aesthetic work of art; for the latter extend indefinitely beyond the former.

5) Perceiving any Islāmic work of art in any of the fine arts is to move through the pattern. Such movement generates a momentum which is as great or as small as the work of art is aesthetically. This momentum is an aesthetic élan which propels the imagination to soar beyond the material work of art in search of a continuation which non-development has made infinite, and hence impossible to attain.

6) The realization of this impossibility is the realization of beauty; indeed, of the sublime, the most beautiful, which is demanded by consciousness, almost-perceived but never reached by the imagination.

In the visual areas, the aesthetic work of art in Islām is called "arabesque." It is in the visual world that the term has become popular. Very little use has been made of the word in the art of sound, though some musical pieces have been called, or described as, "arabesques" because of their fulfillment of the foregoing six principles. Such pieces in the Muslim musical tradition are known as *taqāsīm* or "divisions," a name which betrays the unit-construction of the aesthetic pattern. The term has never been used in the literary art, though it describes its nature perfectly.

Whether we look into pre-Islāmic poetry, the Holy Qur'ān (which is the absolute prototype of all things Islāmic), in the tremendous corpus of poetry of the Muslim peoples, or in their prose compositions (*khuṭab* or orations, *rasā'il* or essays, *qiṣaṣ* or novels/narratives), we find everywhere the arabesque of the literary art. Certainly, the overwhelming majority of literary works produced by the Muslim peoples in any language are arabesques. Radically unlike the dramatic literature of ancient Greece and of the West, these works observe and fulfill the six principles. Of any *qaṣīdah* ("ode"), of the *One Thousand and One Nights*, or the *Maqāmat* of Ḥarirī and Hamadhānī, as of the Holy Qur'ān itself, it can be said without the slightest hesitation that:

1) It is composed of units which are as autonomous, complete and integral as they are beautiful.

2) Its units are of a certain number. But because of the non-developmental nature of the pattern, they do not arrive at anything that could be called a conclusion.

3) It begins nowhere and ends nowhere. If it has ended, it does so arbitrarily and not for any inherent necessity.

4) It creates aesthetic satisfaction in the beholder through the perception of its flow or rendering; its generation in him of an élan towards the Infinite.

We may therefore conclude that the literatures of the Muslim peoples do constitute a unity, an Islāmic unity; indeed, an aesthetic literary unity whose essence is the arabesque. And the reader needs no more from us now than the suggestion that by composing the literary work of art, the Muslim man-of-letters invites us to ride his composition as a vehicle, with which to take off in a flight of our imagination which is most pleasing, toward Allah (SWT), the only Transcendent, Ultimate Reality to which nothing is comparable and which is forever beyond all sensory intuition. Realization of aesthetic beauty in the sublime, is in Islām, never the perception of the Absolute which is God, but that of His infinity, i.e., of His imperceptibility.

THE CRUSADER IN THE MEMOIRS OF USĀMAH IBN MUNQIDH

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Usāmah ibn Munqidh (1095-1188) was a member of the ruling family of Shayzār, north of Syria. His life and career is best described by Philip K. Hitti, the translator of his *Memoirs* in English, as “an epitome of Arab civilization as it flourished during the early crusading period on Syrian soil.”¹ A period of political exile in his life had given him a valuable opportunity to travel through the Arab world accompanying the Muslim armies or joining Muslim rulers in Damascus and Cairo, sharing and advising in the process of decision-making not only in warfare against the Franks but also in the political affairs of the Muslims. Besides his direct involvement in the political and military affairs of his days, Usāmah had a natural talent for a good number of social and intellectual activities, and thus added to his political and fighting abilities a deep concern for writing, composing poetry, horse riding and hunting among other interests.

These qualities made Usāmah the most interesting personality among the Syrian Arabs of his time, and his *Memoirs* a work of extraordinary value. It is a storehouse of information and valuable reflections on almost all aspects of life among the Franks and their Muslim antagonists. It is an autobiographical narration of Usāmah’s encounters with the Franks told in a style which offers a different way of treating historical events other than the monotonous information about warfare which characterizes most of the known professional histories of the Crusades written by Muslim and Western writers alike.

Among the various aspects of Usāmah’s *Memoirs*, this paper deals

¹*Memoirs of an Arab Syrian Gentleman, or An Arab Knight in the Crusades, Memoirs of Usāmah Ibn Munqidh* (Kitāb Al I’tibār). Trans. by Philip K. Hitti, Khayyāṭs, Beirut, 1964, p. 3.