

CONCEPTS OF LITERATURE IN ISLAM AND IN WESTERN TRADITION

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ABSTRACT

Mainstream education all over the world is largely based on the Western or secular model. Muslims all around the world have been instilled with Western thoughts and way of life. Muslims as a global community have been equally or more severely affected by colonial education policy. According to Al-Attas (1978), because of this false education system, the pursuit of knowledge in relation to the Western colonialization has become a deviation from the truth. Only with the presence of strong beliefs and firm Islamic practice that one will not be misled by the Western ideologies. Nevertheless, this does not mean that we Muslims have nothing to learn from the West. Not all the things that come from Western are bad or detrimental. Some knowledge can be considered beneficial. Regarding literature, some of us might have worrisome feeling and doubt of whether or not we should learn and study literature from Western tradition. Therefore, with the sense of humility and responsibility towards Muslim Ummah, we should study and discuss this matter calmly and rationally, without hurling threats or creating an atmosphere of animosity and tense. Hence, this paper will shed light on the discussion upon this matter with regard to the concepts of literature in Islam and in Western tradition.

Keywords: *Islamisation of knowledge, western literature, literature in Islam.*

INTRODUCTION

There is a limit to the human endurance of suffering without protest. Yet, in reality, some of us ‘suffer’ from the effects of Western colonisation. In relation to this, Al Faruqi (1988: 18) with his concept of the disease or Malaise of the Ummah inserted that major effects of the Malaise are on the political, economic and religio-cultural fronts, and he added that Muslims have been “secularised, Westernised and de-Islamised by internal and external agents of their enemies”. For a thousand years, some Muslims have strayed so far away from God’s teachings and lived in such ignorance that they are powerless to destroy the evil perpetrated before their eyes. One clear example to relate to this is in terms of education.

Mainstream education all over the world is largely based on the Western or secular model. Muslims all around the world have been instilled with Western thoughts and way of life. Muslims as a global community have been equally or more severely affected by colonial education policy. According to Al-Attas (1978), because of this false education system, the pursuit of knowledge in relation to the Western colonisation has become a deviation from the truth. Only with the presence of strong beliefs and firm Islamic practice that one will not be misled by the Western ideologies. The only way we can overcome these is by returning to the teachings of the Omniscient God, with the guidance of the Qur’an and Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.).

Nevertheless, this does not mean that we Muslims have nothing to learn from the West. Not all the things that come from Western are bad or detrimental. Some knowledge can be considered beneficial. The most important thing is that we should know to differentiate between good and bad things. We must use our minds to gain knowledge, regardless of the fact that it originates even from the West. We should read all the books, sources and reference available, but critically. We can learn from others including Western, but without dispensing with our critical faculty. In this way, we shall seek only the good things and cast aside the bad ones.

Regarding literature, some of us might have worrisome feeling and doubt of whether or not we should learn and study literature from Western tradition. Therefore, with the sense of humility and responsibility towards Muslim Ummah, we should study and discuss this matter calmly and rationally, without hurling threats or creating an atmosphere of animosity and tense. Hence, this paper will shed light on the discussion upon this matter with regard to the concepts of literature in Islam and in Western tradition.

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Comparisons between Islamic and Western Literature

Literature is an art and art relates to culture. It is in accordance with the opinion of Ali Ashraf (1978) who considered literature as a form of human activity. By definition, according to Ali Ashraf (1978: 52), “literature is that form of writing which man creates with the help of language in order to enjoy his exploration of the experience of life. Its basic characteristic is its fictional quality”. The most attractive forms of literature are poetry, novel and drama (Ali Ashraf, 1978).

Among the literary works that relate to these forms are of those originated from Islamic community. Interestingly, Islamic literature can be considered as comprehensive, universal and ‘life-reflected’ in nature. Islam which is a comprehensive account of the human code of conduct talks about everything and not confined just to certain things. The comprehensibility of literature in Islam can be clearly seen by taking the Qur’an as its perfect exemplary of a work of art. By definition, the first example of Islamic literature is the Qur’an. The inimitability of the Qur’an is not limited to its content but also in its language. Some concede that it is poetic in form, but they have almost unanimously rejected the idea that it is poetry in the conventional sense of the term. Qur’an can be considered as a piece of literature but it is indeed incomparable with other forms of literature. The Qur’an itself points out that the Prophet Muhammad was not a poet since it is totally different from any other poem:

We have not instructed the (Prophet) in poetry, nor is it meet for him: this is no less than a message and Qur’an making things clear. (Qur’an 36: 69).

The Qur’an embodies linguistic and literary beauty which exceeds anything of human origin. This is due to the fact that no one has ever been able to compose anything remotely in resembling its linguistic, literary, or conceptual elegance. This point is repeatedly emphasized in the Holy Book itself. For instance, the Qur’an says:

If the whole of mankind and the jinn were to gather together to produce the like of this Qur’an, they could not produce the like thereof, even if they backed up each other with help and support. (17: 88).

Besides, there is also one Hadith that can be related to this unique feature of Qur'an. It is related from Abu Saïd that the Apostle of Allah said:

[...] The superiority of the Word of Allah over other words is like the superiority of Allah over his creation. (Tirmidhi).

In addition, Islamic literature stresses on the universality and absoluteness of the values. It is didactic as opposed to belletristic literature. In other words, literature is not simply for the sake of literature. By this approach, it teaches us moral lesson so that we can be better human beings. The art of the Islamic world reflects its cultural values, and reveals the way Muslims view the spiritual realm and the universe. For the Muslims, reality begins with and centers on Allah s.w.t. Allah is at the heart of worship and aspirations for Muslims, and is the focus of their lives. Therefore, Islamic art focuses on the spiritual representation of objects and beings, and not their physical qualities.

In contrast, Western thought upon art such as literature is a total difference. Western literature is a belletristic in nature where literature is for literature sake. Western literature weights on facts and figures, without the presence of values. It emphasises more on elements like beauty, love, tragedy, and mystical and promotes “art for art’s sake” connotation. This saying affirmed that art is valuable as art, in which artistic pursuits are their own justification and that art does not need moral justification and indeed is allowed to be morally neutral or subversive. For example, Poe (1850) argues in his essay “The Poetic Principle”, that:

*We have taken it into our heads that to write a poem simply for the poem's sake [...] and to acknowledge such to have been our design, would be to confess ourselves radically wanting in the true poetic dignity and force: — but the simple fact is that would we but permit ourselves to look into our own souls we should immediately there discover that under the sun there neither exists nor can exist any work more thoroughly dignified, more supremely noble, than this very poem, this poem per se, this poem which is a poem and nothing more, **this poem written solely for the poem's sake.***

Art for art’s sake connotes the idea that a work of art has an intrinsic value without didactic and moral purpose. According to Lessing (1766), beauty is “the primary object of the arts.” It seems that Western people appreciate the beauty of an art without a need to consider any other values. That is why, for them, even a naked human body can be considered as source of arts and literary work. They study, sketch and paint a figure of naked body in art class for example, as exhibited by a model, without having a sense of shyness or embarrassment. It simply because they are doing it for the sake of art, and again, art is for art’s sake.

However, some scholars have disputed the concept of art for art’s sake. In relation to this, Achebe (1973) insisted that art is always in the service of man. Human being is the one who creates such art. Thus, whatever piece of literary work produced, it is always related to the people or society in which it is being produced. Since it is the product of human beings, then it cannot be entirely good or perfect.

In terms of creativity, our creativity takes place within the context of what Allah has created (Sheikh Salman al-Oadah, 2018). According to Hassan Langgulung (2002: 15), “creativity under Islamic psychology explains man’s nature as one who performs actions that are constructive and morally in line with his faith and love for Allah”. Thus, human beings can be creative and innovative, but within limits. Human beings should certainly celebrate and exercise their creative

abilities in the light of His blessings and He is the One who gave us the abilities that we have. For instance, we use language to produce amazing works of literature, but it is Allah who gives us the aptitude for language and it is within his permission that we are able to communicate our thought and ideas. The Qur'an says:

(God) Most Gracious! It is He Who has taught the Qur'an. He has created man. He has taught him speech (and intelligence). (55: 1-4).

All in all, He is the one who gives us broad scope to be inventive and creative, inspiring us to employ our minds, gifts, skills and ingenuity to develop, enhance and improve our lives.

Stance of Islam on Literature

Concerning the stand of Islam on poetry, we can possibly say that Islam does not regard poetry or any other works of art as evil in itself. "In poetry, there is wisdom" proves that poetry is something that is not inappropriate. It is to be much-admired and encouraged if it emanates from minds steeped in faith, and tries to carry out in life the fine sentiments it expresses. It also should aim at the Glory of Allah or praise the persons who strive in the way of Allah rather than at self-glorification. Islam's great work in art and literature for example recognize one leader that is the Prophet, follow one guidance which is the Holy Qur'an, and look towards one Goal that is Allah s.w.t. (Pickthall, 1927).

Besides, Prophet (p.b.u.h.) himself encouraged chanting poetry while travelling. He was even greeted with eulogy when he entered Medina. The Prophet also praised Labid as a poet as Abu Hurairah reported that Allah's Messenger (p.b.u.h.) said: The truest words (ever) uttered by a poet is the saying of Labid: "Behold! Everything besides Allah is vain". (Abu Dawud). Moreover, among Prophet's poets were Hassan bin Thabit, Ka'b bin Malik, 'Abdallah ibn Rawaha and Ka'b ibn Zuhayr. The duty of Hassan bin Thabit for instance was to defend the Prophet through poetry. It shows how he celebrated the honor of the Prophet. It was through poetry that the spread of message of Islam was well-accepted by the people. These prove that even our Prophet (p.b.u.h.) was not opposing literature like poetry in Islam.

Furthermore, statement from the Prophet that "God is beautiful and He loves beauty" can also suggest that Muslims are not supposed to dismiss the element of beauty in the world of art. Indeed, a work of art should be in combination with the elements of beauty and truth. This is somehow parallel to the Keatsian view of a work of art that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty". In fact, according to Islam, works of art do not aim at beautifying and refining the accessories of human life, but they rather seek to beautify and exalt human life itself (Pickthall, 1927). However, the literature should be useful and beneficial knowledge in a way that it is able to entertain and educate us. "The worst person on the Day of Judgment will be the one whose 'ilm or knowledge does not benefit anyone".

CONCLUSION

Total rejection of the Western literature is neither possible nor practical and necessary as there is widespread reception of the subject in Muslim society. Nevertheless, English literary texts are value-laden and inseparably linked to some cultural and religious ideas. For instance, they may be related to the concept of trinity of god and the concept of original sin. All these literary works such as great poems are widely propagated through Islamic world. According to Abdul Hamid Abu Sulayman (1989: 68), "while studying the achievements of contemporary civilization, Muslims should not endorse its propaganda and open their hearts and minds to its cultural invasion

and welcome its alien colonialist hegemony”. There is a need to Islamize literature like English literature from the West as literature will just remain as human-made ideologies in the absence of Islamic religion.

Thus, in the teaching and learning settings for example, teachers should not take a permissive attitude and consider a writer whose code of life is completely at variance with the Islamic code and let the students to respond to that writing or be influenced by it as they like without providing them guidelines and sufficient clarification upon matters being studied. According to Ali Ashraf (1978), if a teacher allows all these to happen, he is considered not doing justice either to literature or to his students. It is because, literature can be extremely seductive and may even be misleading, corrosive and destructive. It is important to discern at least a difference between revealed knowledge and acquired knowledge like literature.

In sum, regardless of from where a literary work is produced, either from Western tradition or among the Muslims themselves, there should be elements of beauty and truth and also reflects spiritual reality as opposed to only material existence, so that it may benefit all human beings. Hence, Islamizing English literary studies is an important intellectual challenge for Muslim scholars of English literature. Such an academic endeavor will allow them to benefit from what is good in English literary texts and protect the Muslim Ummah from what is morally and culturally harmful and contrary to their religious values. Since the centrality of the subject matter for both Islam and English literature is the same which is about human beings and their lives, it seems to be no problem to make connection between both.

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