

A CRITICAL OVERVIEW OF THE PRINCIPLES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF ISLAMIC LITERATURE

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Islamic literature is a term referring to the school of thought which believes that a good literary work should view God, man and the world through the lens of Islam. It is conceived that the style of such literature must be of high quality with the Quran, Hadith and the legacy of the Islamic scholars being its model. This school of literary explication was developed by Abul Hasan Ali an-Nadawi, and it is fast gaining currency among literary figures in the world today. However, most of what has been written on the theory and practice of Islamic literature is in Arabic. The aim of this study, therefore, is to give the English readers an opportunity of getting more acquainted with this school of thought in the field of literature. Apart from giving account of the growth and development of the school, this study examined certain critical and salient issues of concern to Islamic literature such as *Itizam* (consistency), language, religion, creativity and truthfulness. The study concluded that Islamic literature, as a sub-literary tradition emanating from Muslims, consistently conforms to Islamic ideology and is characterized by truthfulness and service to humanity. The study suggested to all stakeholders of the discipline, which can be in any language, covering all aspects of human endeavour, to convoke a world conference and establish an academy as part of developing the school of thought further. This step is expedient so that it may serve as a veritable platform of literary creativity and a better alternative to other extant schools of thought in the field of literature.

Keywords: Critical overview, Principles, Characteristics, Islamic literature.

Introduction

Islamic literature is known in Arabic as *Al-AdabullIslami*. It is defined by Albashaa (1998, p113) as “an artistic purposeful expression about the reality of life, the universe and Man as felt by man with an expression stemming from the Islamic perception of the Creator, the Almighty and His creatures.” In the word of Kutub (1993, p6) “it is a beautiful expression about the Universe, Life and Man within the context of Islamic perception of the Universe, the Life and Man.” According to Baringhish (1997, p114) Islamic Literature is a beautiful artistic expression of a Muslim writer about his experience in life through the Islamic concept. Comprehensively he defined it as:

An influential, beautiful expression of art, emanated from a Faithful personality, an interpreter for human, life and the universe in accordance with the principles of Islam, motivator of pleasure and benefit, activator of emotion and thought, and the Stimulator to take a position and to embark on certain activities.

It could be deduced, as observed by Abdullah (2008,p 15) that any literary work which could be considered as Islamic Literature must certify two conditions. First, it has to be a beautiful expression about life, the Universe and Man. Secondly; the expression must conform with Islamic teachings and principles. And by extension, the originator of the expression must be a Muslim. It is also a condition that the work must be purposeful, because, as stated by Albasha (1985, p92), all the deeds and utterances of a Muslim must be guided and must eschew frivolous things. This assertion shows that Islamic literature is not merely beautiful expression and creativity as believed by the school of Arts for Arts, but must be pleasurable to the author and beneficial to the society.

It could also be discernable from the foregoing that the theme of this type of Literature is wide in scope, and it is multilateral. It encompasses Man with his emotions and desires, his dreams and pains, his goods and bad, his worldly affairs and the heavenly ones. It equally discusses life with all what is in it; such as success and failure and fundamentals and values. The theme also includes Universe, its highland and oceans, its earth and sky. As well as the nature and its singing birds, its various types of Animals, its beautiful gardens, weather and climate and their different seasons, Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter, etc. (Al-Basha, 1985). It addresses the political, social, economic, educational and related issues. It could be deduced from this statement that Islamic literature is not a literature that concentrates mainly on topics that have to do with worship or propagation of Islam alone. But, like other literature, it dwelled into all varieties of worldly phenomena and added that of the heavenly ones to it, with the condition that these must be viewed through the lens of Islam.

The Features of Islamic Literature

Islamic Literature has certain features that differentiate it from other literary schools, which could be summarized as follows

1. It is a literature with aims and objectives. That means that an Islamic writer or poet embarks on his creative work, not for the fun of it, as it was the case of the school of arts for arts, rather, literature to him is a means to an end, not an end in itself. And the objective, according to Albashaa (1985, p116), is, summarily, to make the faith in God firmly established in peoples' hearts, make good values deeply rooted in their minds and to ignite in them the potential power of doing good and righteousness.
2. It is a literature of adherence and consistency. Not like adherence of socialism and existentialism. It is adherence to Islam and its teachings, which means that a writer or a poet must adhere strictly to the teachings and principles of Islam at all time in his work.
3. It is an integrated literature. That means the form and content of Islamic literature must complement one another and must be of a high standard because neither the form alone nor the content without the other can make a literary work effective to achieve its prime objective. Hence, the practitioner of this type of literature must be of broad education, very rich in ideas, very skillful in the art of creativity and must possess a noble hunch and feelings.
4. It must be independent of any other ideology or influence apart from Islam.
5. It must be original. The originality here implies that the work of a literary figure must be purely an effusion of the features of the Islamic nation the writer or the poet is affiliated to.
6. It must be an effective and influential Literature. This theory presupposes that its practitioner must be a wholehearted Muslim, who sincerely believes in Allah, practice Islam accordingly and very vast in its teachings and values.

The Origin, Growth and Development of the School

The term *al-adabullIslami* (Islamic Literature) was used for the first time by Sayid Kutub in 1952. It is just like other Islamic terms, such as Islamic Economy, Islamic Banking, Islamic Ideology, Islamic

Philosophy, Islamization of Knowledge, and others that emanated at that time, as a result of Islamic awareness activities and movements going on across the Muslim world. (Abdullahi, p17). Abul Hasan Ali Nadawi, according to albaashaa (1985), is the first person to write a book to call the attention of scholars to the necessity of establishing an Islamic literary school. The School, he stated, would formulate theories based on the principles and teachings of Islam for the purpose of analysing literary work produced by Muslims across all the Arabic literary and historical periods. He and other advocates of this school believe that analyzing and criticizing of Muslims' literary works with any other theories will be inappropriate and invalid (Al-Nadawi, 1990). They believe that all the literary works of any historical periods are the products of the ideology, or system of principles and beliefs of their originators. They also felt that since the Socialism and Capitalism, which are the current biggest and most influential social school of thought in the world today, and other Intellectual, philosophical and literary trends that emanated from Western Europe and America, such like Existentialism, Naturalism, Realism, Arabism, symbolism, Structuralism and other, are using literary output to disseminate their ideology, spreading their principles and wooing people to their school without any of them conforming totally with Islamic teachings and principles. There is a need therefore to have Islamic-oriented literary school to cater for the need of the Muslims in the field of literature and criticism.

Though at the beginning of this crusade, some Muslims were skeptical about it while some believe literature is a creative writing and should not be tied down to religious belief or tenet and that a writer must be free to express his feelings, emotions and ideas without any hindrance. The exponents of this also argued that since Islam is a way of life and a matter of conviction, anybody who professes it must conform totally to its injunctions and teachings, and this must reflect in all its endeavors in all ramifications. The freedom of literary personality, therefore, must be within the pivot of the dictates of his religion, and that should be the yardstick to be used in analyzing and criticizing his work. (Al-Baashaa, 1985)

Many Muslim writers have contributed immensely to formulation of this literary school. Apart from Al-Nadawi, who presented a paper calling for the establishment of the school of Islamic literature, we also have the like of Sayid Kutub, who also wrote an article to support the idea. His brother, Muhammad Kutub, was the first to heed to his call by authoring a book entitled "Manihajul Fannil Islaami" (The Methodology of Islamic Art). After him we have Naghib Al-Kaylaani, who published a book entitled "Al-Islamiyat wal madhahibul Adabiyyah" (Islamic and the Literary Schools). They were followed by 'Imadu din Khalil, who authored different books on the field. The first of his publications is "Fi al-Naqd il Islami (on Islamic Criticism). These opened the door for the influx of publications and call for adoption of the school. Among the institutions that answered this call is Al-Imam bin Saud University in Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The University strives to raise it up from callings and theoretical level to practical and implementation level by making it a course to be studied in the Department of Rhetoric and criticism (Albaashaa, 1985, p90-91). This trend has gained currency in many Universities today across the globe, and many postgraduate students have researched into it at their Masters and doctoral programmes. These efforts were crowned with establishment of Word League of Islamic literature in 1984 (Wikipedia, 2014), which draws its membership from the nooks and crannies of the world with about regional branches across the globe. The League has the following as its objectives:

- Enhancement and highlighting old and present features of Islamic literature,
- Establishment of the rules of Islamic literary criticism,
- Formulation of a complete theory of Islamic literature,
- Development of Islamic methodologies for modern literary arts,
- Re-writing the history of Islamic literature pertaining to Muslim people literatures,
- Collection of distinguished Islamic literary works and translating them into the languages of Muslim people and other international languages,
- Giving due care to child's literature,
- Criticizing and shedding light on the negative aspects of deviating literary schools,
- Reinforcement of the international aspect of Islamic literature,

- Fostering relations and cooperation among Muslim men of letters and combining their efforts in accordance with a wise and moderate methodology,
- Contributing in the upbringing of Muslim generations and formulating the Muslim personality dignified with their straightforward religion and great heritage,
- Facilitating means of publication for the members of the League and
- Defending the literary rights of the League and its members (Muslim Writers, 2008)

Critical overview of Specific Issues of Islamic Literature

The Name and the Religious Condition

Some of the critics of this school believe the name given to this school is not appropriate because it would shatter the Arabic literature from where it originated, and it would amount to having Islamic literature and another non-Islamic in the same literature. Others believe the naming is mere “stating the obvious” because all the literary works in the Islamic world are Islamic Literature (Abdullah, 2008). Though, most of the literary schools, across the age, do not bear the name of the religion their exponents professed. But it is certain that some of them, like Classical, Romanticism, New Criticism and others, are also faith based school of literary School (Albaashaa, 1985), which means there is nothing wrong in a literary school being a faith based. And according to Abdullah (2008), literature is a human product, if it conforms with Islamic teachings and principles, it will be considered Islamic, and if it does not conform to it, it is simply unIslamic. He also submitted that if the Muslim *Ummah* (Nation) could be named as the Islamic nation and we have Islamic life, there should be nothing wrong in naming literary school an Islamic School or a literary work an Islamic literature.

In order to ascertain this idea, it would be pertinent to examine some texts in Arabic literature. One of the Arabic poets, Ilya Abu Madi, a non-Muslim, is well known with his philosophical thought and idea. In one of his numerous poems he pondered on the world, and the creatures therein, including himself, and concluded that it was a puzzle. He says (Ibraheem, 2011):

جئت لا أعلم من أين، ولكني أتيت
ولقد أبصرت قدامي طريقا، فمشيت
وسأبقى سائرا، إن شئت هذا أم أبيت
كيف جئت؟ كيف أبصرت طريقى؟
لست أدري !

اننى جئت وأمضى وأنا لا أعلم،
أنا لغز وذهاى كمجئى طلسم
والذى أوجد هذا اللغز لغز مبهم
لاتجادل ذا الحجبى من قال...
إنى لست أدري !
قد سألت البحر يوماً هل أنا يا بحر منك؟
هل صحيح ماروا به بعضهم عنك؟
أمتري ماز عموا زورا وبهتانا وإفكا؟

ضحكتأمواجهمنيو قالت: لستأدري!

Meaning

*I came (to the world) I knew not from where, but indeed I am here
Surely, I saw a road ahead of me, and I started working through it
How did I come? How did I found my way?
I do not know!*

*Verily, I came and I will go I did not know
I am a puzzle, my going, like my coming, is a puzzle
And that, which created this puzzle, is a hidden puzzle as well
Do not argue with an intelligent person, who says:
I do not know!*

*I have, once, asked the ocean, O ocean, am I from you?
Is it true what some of them said about you and Me?
Or don't you think what they claim is falsehood and lie?
It laughed, and through its waves said to me
I do not know!*

It could be observed that this poet looks at himself and the world around him and could not understand from where it all comes. He believes it all puzzles that nobody could understand. And here is a Muslim poet, Maruf AbdulGanyAr-Rasafi from Baghdad, who also ponders on the nature and was sure it comes from Allah. He says (Ibraheem, 2011):

أنظر لتلك الشجرة ** ذات الغصون النضرة
كيف نمت من حبة ** وكيف صارت شجرة
وابحث وقل من ذا الذي ** أوجد فيها الثمرة
ذاك هو الله الذي ** أنعمه
منه مرة
ذو حكمة بالغة ** وقدرة مقتدرة
وانظر إلى الشمس التي ** جزوتها مستعرة
فيها ضياء وبها ** حرارة منتشرة
من ذا الذي أوجدها ** في الجو مثل الشررة
ذاك هو الله الذي ** أنعمه منه مرة
ذو حكمة بالغة ** وقدرة مقتدرة
انظر إلى الليل فمن ** أوجد فيه قمره
وزانه بأنجم ** كالدرر المنتثرة
ذاك هو الله الذي ** أنعمه منه مرة
ذو حكمة بالغة ** وقدرة مقتدرة

انظر إلى المرء وقل ** من شق فيه بصره
 من ذا الذي جهزه ** بقدرة مبتكرة
 ذاك هو الله الذي ** أنعمه منهمة
 ذو حكمة بالغة ** وقدرة مقتدرة

Meaning

*Look at that tree, which has beautiful braches
 How did it grew from seed and how did it becomes a tree
 Do the research and tell me who made fruits available on it
 That is Allah, whose blessings are overwhelming
 The custodian of high wisdom and the power to destine*

*Also look at sun, whose fire rages
 From it, there is light and with it the heat spreads
 Carry out research and tell me who placed it in the atmosphere like speckles
 That is Allah, whose blessings are overwhelming
 The custodian of high wisdom and the power to destine*

*Look at the human being and say to who belongs the incision of hissight?
 Whoendowed him the ability ofinnovation?
 That is Allah, whose blessings are overwhelming
 The custodian of high wisdom and the power to destine*

From the above poems, it could be observed by a discernable mind that, the first poet, who does not believe in the existence of God, could not explain the puzzle of creation, while the second poet, through the teachings of Islam, believes that it is Allah (God) who created everything. He has no doubt about the origin of creation, and that informs his repetition of the word "that is Allah." Obviously the second poet is echoing the Qur'an 41 [فصلت: 9 - 12]

*Say, "Do you indeed disbelieve in He who created the earth in two days and attribute to Him equals? That is the Lord of the worlds."
 And He placed on the earth firmly set mountains over its surface, and He blessed it and determined its [creatures'] sustenance in four days therein without distinction - for [the information] of those who ask.
 Then He directed Himself to the heaven while it was smoke and said to it and to the earth,
 "Come [into being], willingly or by compulsion." They said, "We have come willingly."
 And He completed them as seven heavens within two days and inspired in each heaven its command. And We adorned the nearest heaven with lamps and as protection. That is the determination of the Exalted in Might, the Knowing.*

What occurred between the two poets is manifestation of Qur'an 2 (البقرة: 26) which says:

Indeed, Allah is not timid to present an example - that of a mosquito or what is smaller than it.

and those who have believed know that it is the truth from their Lord. But as for those who disbelieve, they say, "What did Allah intend by this as an example?" He misleads many thereby and guides many thereby. And He misleads not except the defiantly disobedient.

It could be deduced from the foregoing that the belief of a literary figure reflects in his works and influences and characterizes his outputs. It is therefore an obvious that it is only a Muslim that can produce an Islamic literature.

However, it is possible for a non-Muslim to produce a literary work which conforms to the teachings and principle of Islam. There is divergent opinion among the scholars of Islamic literary school on the consideration of that as part of Islamic literature. Some of them believes strictly that a non-Muslim cannot produce an Islamic literature. Because he does not believe in Islam and that the conformity is a mere coincidence, which comes out of the fact that every human being is born in conformity with the primordial nature *al fitra* (Islam), according to one of the traditions of the Holy prophet of Islam which says:

'Every child is born on Fitrat (a natural inclination towards perfect and practical Islam). It is his parents who turn him towards Judaism, Christianity or fire-worship.' (Mishkāt).

As a result of this, they ruled that the such work will be called *AdabulFitrah* (The natural literature). (Ibrahim, 2011). While the second opinion ruled that any work that conforms to Islamic teachings and principles, no matter the religion of the producer, must be considered as Islamic Literature (Abdullah, 2008). An example of such work could be drawn from the work of Lubaid bn Rabi'a al-Amir, a poet from the *Jahiliyyah* period (pre-Islamic period), which was considered as the period of ignorant, says in one of his poem (Ibraheem, 2011):

ألا كل شيء ما خلا الله باطل ** وكل نعيم لا محالة زائل

Meaning

*Lo! Everything except Allah is false
And every favor and luxury shall be evanescent*

Here it appeared that the poet believed that there is no God except Allah, which is a cornerstone in Islam and anybody who believes this wholeheartedly is a Muslim, but, unfortunately, this was uttered before the advent of Islam. But fortunately the poet was still alive when Prophet Muhammad commenced his mission and the poet eventually accepted Islam. It was when he was deeply involved and aware of the teachings of Islam that he realized that one of the notions he expressed, in the line of the poem, was erroneous, and he quickly corrected himself by adding another line thus:

سوى جنة الفردوس إن نعيمها ** يدوم فان الموت لا بد نازل

*Except the favor and luxury of the paradise of Firdaws
Surely it favor continues everlastingly, Indeed the death shall come.*

Apparently, the poet was not aware of the life after death, the Judgment, and reward with either paradise or hellfire, which were part of the core teachings of Islam. But with his conversion, he was able to realize that. It is evident from the foregoing that one of the ideas expressed by the poet conformed to Islamic teachings and the other one needed modification. This fact is an indication that for a work to be perfectly considered to be an Islamic literature it must emanate from an author who wholeheartedly believes in Islam and that the one from non-Muslim is a coincident that must be considered *AdabulFitrah*.

Iltizaam (Adherence)

The above submission post a question, which is if a Muslim produces a literary work that does not conform to Islamic principles and teachings will it be considered part of Islamic Literature? The answer to this brings us to another feature of the school which is termed *Iltizaam* (Adherence). *Iltizaam* in Literature is for a literary personality to adhere, in his work, to a belief, or an ideology or a philosophy or principle of a school of thought (Al-husainy, 1987, p25). Specifically, in Islamic literature, *Iltizaam* is for a poet or prose writer to adhere to Islamic teachings, principles and values in his work consistently whatever the situation or circumstance may be. If. Therefore, a writer adhere consistently in his work with the teachings and principles of Islam he would be considered an Islamic poet or prose writer and his work would also be considered a genre of Islamic literature. But if the writer adheres to the teachings and principles in part of his work and fails to adhere to it in other ones, he would be considered “inconsistent Islamic poet or prose writer and that particular work of his will not be considered a genre of Islamic Literature. An example of this could be drawn from Ahmad Shaowki, the king of Arabic poets’ poem, which he composed after a Ramadan fasting. He says:

رمضان ولي، هاتها ياساقي ** مشتاقة
تسعى إلى مشتاق
ما كان أكثره على ألفتها ** وأقله في
طاعة الخلاق
الله غفار الذنوب جميعها ** إن كان ثم من
الذنوب يواقى
بالأمس قد كنا سجينى طاعة ** واليوم من العيد
بالإطلاق

Meaning

*Ramadan has left – bring her forth O’ bartender
A yearner is coming to one yearning for her
How much he used to frequent her
And little he spent in obeying the Creator
Yesterday we were imprisoned by obedience
And today Eid has blessed us by setting us free* (Ghilan, 2013)

Alcohol consumption is forbidden in Islam. It was reported in *SunanAbiDawood* (3189) as it is narrated that Ibn ‘Umar said: the Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said:

“Allaah has cursed alcohol, the one who drinks it, the one who pours it, the one who sells it, the one who buys it, the one who squeezes it (squeezes the grapes, etc.), the one for whom it is squeezed, the one who carries it, and the one to whom it is carried.”

But here Shawqi was asking for it in his poem, and it appears that he believed the month of Ramadan has been a shackle that stops one temporarily from imbibing their alcohol and enjoying themselves. So with the end of Ramadan they can return to their enjoyment. Obviously this is a departure from what Shawqi is known for in his poetry. He used to conform to Islamic principles and teachings, but he was not consistent with his adherence to the principles. Even the defense put up by him when, according to Mohamed Ghilan (2013), Shaykh Muhammad Mutawalli Ash-Sha’raawi confronted and asked him why he would write such a poem. Shawqi laughed and gave a clever response. He asked Shaykh Ash-Sha’raawi, “Don’t you have the Quran memorized?”, to which Shaykh Ash-Sha’raawi replied, “Of course, we do!” Shawqi then retorted, “Then don’t you recall the verse that says (And as to

the poets, those who go astray follow them. Do you not see that they wander about in every valley? And that they say that which they do not do?) [26:224-226]." For shawqi to have said what he doesn't do, means he is lying, and lying is another act that negates the teachings of Islam. So this particular work of Shawqi is not Islamic, and he is, therefore, considered as inconsistent poet.

It should be noted here that lying and exaggeration, which were considered one of the qualities of good poetry in classical Arabic literature have no basis in Islamic literature, and the work of any writer that is characterized by them is considered unislamic. While the owner will be classified as inconsistent. Abu Tayyib Al-Mutanabbi, who lives in Abbasid Period of Arabic Literature, is a good example of poets who lie and exaggerate in order to please the rulers he praises and that has placed him among the poets who are not fully adhered to Islamic Teaching. In one of such poems he says:

لو كان علمك بالإله مقسما في الناس ما بعث الإله رسولا
لو كان لفظك فيهم ما أنزل الفرقان والتوراة والإنجيل

*If your knowledge of God is divided among the people,
God would not have sent a messenger
If your word (has got to them), He wouldn't have sent down
the Criterion (Qur'an), the Torah (New testament) and the Injil (old Testament)*

Obviously, the poet has raised the person he is praising above the Prophets and above his ability and capability as a human being, and this is not in conformity with Islamic teaching. Truthfulness is, therefore, a strong feature of Islamic literature, which must be adhered to consistently.

Language of the Literature

One of the controversial issues in Islamic Literature, among its exponents, is the issue of language of the literary school. Some scholars believe that since Islamic Literature originated from Arabic Literature and the fact that Arabic is the official language of Islam, Arabic must then be the only language of the Islamic Literature. To some scholar this is not appropriate. Though, according to Abdullah (2008), it is the aspiration of the Muslims around the world that Arabic becomes the lingua franca of the Muslims across the world, but then, Allah has wisdom in creating different languages and sending each of his prophet with the language of his people. It is undisputable fact that Muslims, who are using their native language to conduct daily transactions, document their experience and express their religious ideas and feelings, are more than those who use Arabic for the same endeavors. These facts make the Islamic scholars conclude that Islamic Literature could adopt any language as its medium of expression. The most important thing is for the content and the language of a literary work to conform with Islamic teachings and principle and must be beneficial to Muslims and the human race as a whole. With this, the literature will have universal application and acceptability like the Islamic Religion itself.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, we have critically examined the Islamic Literature as a literary school of thought, through which literary genres produced by Muslims are to be analyzed and criticized. The school was established and its theories were propounded by Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi of India, Sayid Kutub and Muhammad Kutub of Egypt, Najib al-Kailani, 'Imaduddin Khalil of Iraq, Abdur-Rahman Al-Baashaa of Syria and others. The Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University of Riyadh, the Islamic University of Medina, and the World League of Islamic Literature played a prominent role in research, development, and spreading of the school.

The Islamic Literature, according to the school, is a poem and prose composed by a Muslim, and that which conforms, consistently, to the teachings and principles of Islam and with the objective of raising man from the abyss of savagery to the height of civilization.

However, it was observed that this type of literature can only be produced by a Muslim who wholeheartedly believes in Islam, and any literary work of non-Muslim that conforms to the principles of Islam shall be considered as natural literature (AdabulFitrah). Likewise, If a Muslim deviates from the teaching and principles of Islam, in part of his work, he would be considered inconsistent. Though that has not taken him out of Islam, The language of the literature should not be confined to Arabic Language alone in order to give the literature the international recognition it deserved.

Most of the materials on this literary school remain in Arabic, effort should be made to make them available in other languages of the world for the benefit of those who does not understand Arabic. All stakeholders of the school of thought are enjoined to convoke a world conference and establish an academy as part of developing the school further. This is expedient so that it may serve as a veritable platform of literary creativity and a better alternative to other extant schools of thought in the field of literature.

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