

Toward Islamization of the Non-Visual Arts: A Brief Discussion of Some Crucial Issues

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In his recent article, "Religious Fascism and Art," Dr. Sa'ad al Dīn Ibrāhīm concludes with these words addressed to all scholars in the visual and non-visual arts field: "Those who have the 'Islamic alternative or alternatives' let them be obliged, if they truly believe in the existence of refined standards for aesthetic creativity different from those available, (let them) endeavor to present these refinements to society. They have endeavored and succeeded in recent years in presenting alternatives in economic institutions, services and investments, which attracted large numbers . . . why do they not do the same in the arts field?"¹

Frantic endeavors at Islamizing the non-visual arts have reached a highpoint at the present time. These endeavors are primarily due to the realization of the grave effect art has on shaping morals and channeling, or swaying them in certain directions, and to its easy accessibility to, and profound effect on, emotion and intellect. Many contemporary Islamists² have found some basis for literary theory but have not arrived at one grounded in the Qur'an and the Sunnah with a view leading to Islamization of the non-visual arts (literature) and the fine arts as a whole. Although this discussion does not present a theory, it attempts to draw attention to crucial issues which may invite further endeavors for the Islamization of these artistic disciplines.

The Present State Of The Arts And Islamic Research Contributions

The problem of labeling all kinds of written material "literature," is itself

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¹That article was published in *al-Shira'* 324 (June) 1988 pp. 6-7.

²Imād al Dīn Khalīl, 'Adnān 'Alī Riḍā al Naḥawī, '*Awdat Allah al Qabsī* is an example. The work of the late Sayyid Qutb and the contemporary Muḥammad Qutb on the arts have, in different ways, provided critical analyses of Islamic works and encouraged Islamization.

indicative of the obliterated sense of refinement needed in the existing non-visual arts. Literature, such as drama, fiction, poetry, and even criticism has been called, among its specialists, "art." But because it has not lived up to refined artistic standards, it has prompted many scholars to center their discussions on the quality and value present in the different existing genres.³

At several points in history similar attempts have existed: al Asma'ī (d. 215 A.H./830 A.D.), Muḥammad Aḥmad Ṭabaṭṭā (d. 322 A.H./933 A.D.), al 'Āmidī (d. 370 A.H./980 A.D.), al Farābī (d. 339 A.H./950 A.D.), and al Jurjānī (d. 392 A.H./1001 A.D.) have concentrated their efforts on quality of style, rhetoric, and means of expression in the work of art. In *Literary Criticism: Roots and Methodology*, Sayyid Qutb⁴ initiated a return to the Qur'an and the *Hadith* as sources, by analyzing emotive values of the work, exploring the nature of Islamic art, describing its characteristics and its basic emergence from Islamic *'aqīdah*. Similarly, in *Experiments in Practical Criticism*, al Qabsī⁵ touches on the Prophet's (ṢAAS) viewpoint of poetry and the legitimacy of poetic expression. In analyzing the significance of the work as a human product, it was learned that human expression, related first and foremost to the human being, has not been explored. We must, then, first find the basis for such a theory in the Qur'an and the Sunnah in order to build a literary, artistic theory around it. Also needed is consideration for the literary benefit of the work for the whole of mankind as it conforms with the sources of Islam, which have been quite accurate about what values should be transmitted and spread in society.

Psycho-Biological Makeup of al-Insān (The Human Being)

1. *Al Fīṭrah* (Man's Pristine Purity)

The pristine nature with which Allah (SWT) has created man is the basic factor in deciding what kind of art is being produced and presented to society. The pristine nature must be preserved in literary expression. The Qur'an is emphatic about the *fiṭrah's* unchangeability:

"It is the pristine nature with which Allah has created people, there is no change for His creation" (30:30).

³See 'Adān 'Alī Riḍā al Naḥawī, *al Adab al Islāmī Inṣānīyatuh wa 'Alamīyatuh* (Riyadh: Dar al Naḥawī llnashr, 1987).

⁴The Arabic title is *al Naqd al Abadī Uṣūluh wa Manāhijuh* (Beirut: Dār al Shurūq, 1980).

⁵*Tajārib fi al Naqd al Adabī al Taṭbīqī* (Oman: Dār al Bashīr, 1985).

“There is no child born except with a pristine nature, his parents make him a Jew, a Christian or a fire worshipper,” said the Prophet (ṢAAS).⁶

A recognition of man’s psycho-biological makeup is thus essential. The human being is made of clay and endowed with the spirit of intellect and wisdom. A balancing of the physical and the spiritual in him is needed so that one side will not surpass the other causing an imbalance.

2. Man’s Unity of Being

All faculties are connected and function in unison. Man is not a fragmented being existing solely emotionally, rationally, or spiritually. Allah (SWT) says in the Qur’an: “And He has created for you hearing, vision and hearts that you may be grateful” (16:78). A romantic, romantic idealist, metaphysical poet or otherwise might assume man’s fragmentation and develop only one part of his makeup rather than the whole self. Similarly, works elevating the mind philosophically or focusing on lower instincts and rendering animalistic productions, as in expressionistic works (Eugene O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape* or *Emperor Jones* are prime examples) or psychological tendencies after Freudian association of ideas (stream of consciousness novels), function from this fragmented vision of man.

3. Inward Peace

Allah (SWT) has explained that man is by nature easy to upset: “Man is fretful when evil befallerth him” (70:20). Art should preserve for the reader a state of stability and peace rather than turmoil and violence. If positive feelings gain artistic focus, a highly refined aesthetic effect will be achieved and, no imbalance in man’s psychological makeup ensues. Both the Qur’an and the *Sunnah* exhort patience, honesty, constant God-consciousness, the awe and love of Allah, the doing of virtuous deeds, preserving kin relations, humility, simplicity, remoteness from false worldly pleasures, and countless other intertwined moral principles which should be the main artistic focus of the various genres. Mankind is also Allah’s vicegerent. They are required, therefore, to propagate all that is good and virtuous without separating religion

⁶al Mundhirī, ed. Naṣīr al Dīn al Albānī, *Saḥīḥ Muslim* (Dimashq: al Maktab al Islāmī, 1972), Hadīth 1852 p. 489. Later cited as *Saḥīḥ Muslim*.

from life, or the sacred from the profane.⁷ This duty in itself demands stability in artistic production.

While these aspects of human beings and their role are by no means comprehensive, they form a basis for artistic expression facilitating the future development and derivation of an artistic theory.

Artistic Subject Matter

Islam has laid down the basis for a work of art resulting from interacting thought and emotion in the human instinct. Once his pristine nature is preserved, the artist's work will stimulate and positively render values such as justice, brotherhood, harmony and cooperation for universal good, as opposed to what is automatically labeled art, propagation of injustice, hatred, power, hunger, and strife.

Islamically principled works of art will create in the person a balanced state, fusing thought and emotion and developing a relatedness to Allah (SWT) through Qur'anic values. Art does not stress one emotion because of others, rather it guarantees moderation or an accurate balancing of emotions. In contrast to propagating wrongdoing in a work of art, assuming it will prompt people to refrain from *zulm*, the work will expose fairness and goodness. We should oppose, for example, hunger scenes, such as those seen in the media, inviting people to help the needy, which, at the same time, create a feeling of revulsion. The art should exhibit Allah's mercy and providence, as well as man's gratitude to Him for His beneficence. Following Divine injunction, it should invite sympathy and mercy for the poor. In this way, a work of art develops the God-created pristine instinct, channels it and allows it to grow in accordance with Islamic moral principles. Purity, virtue, moral cleanliness—these are the center of human relations, whether they are expressed in poetry, fiction, drama, or painting.

The work of art will have enjoined goodness and prohibited evil by avoiding it (evil) in artistic expression. In other words, the rendering of evil in the work is itself a propagation of evil, and any avoidance of it with a focus on Qur'anic moral values, results in total goodness. If evil is exposed in the work of art, it is not to be portrayed as acceptable, but, rather, as unacceptable and harmful. The artist's job is to educate the self and channel it toward the right path.

⁷See Isma'īl Rājī al Fārūqī "Islām and Art," *Studia Islamica*, 37 (1973) pp. 81-109.

Truth as Artistic Measure

The use of nature as an object for romanticized dreams runs contrary to the Qur'an. Allah (SWT) says: "And the poets – It's those straying in evil, who follow them. Have you not seen how they wander astray in every valley, and how they say what they do not do? Except those who believe and do good works" (26: 224-227).

Art should not deal with one aspect of the universe, or one element, and glorify it. In poetry, fiction, or drama, the focus is on *Tawhīd*. Flowers, mountains, dew drops, clouds, stars, or planets stand in art as signs for Allah (SWT). Description of nature is, therefore, indicative of Oneness and nourishes such a vision in the reader's psychological and intellectual makeup. The universe is described, not as a chance-determined creation, but as one that is systematic, orderly, harmonized, and controlled by the Creator. Consequently, nature art, in poetry, drama, or fiction and with extensive imagery, will embody signs of goodness and beauty, urging constant return to and awe of Allah. Nature art will have achieved universality and will have addressed all humans, because truth is its measure. In contrast to works from mere imagination based on false reverie.

Unlike romantic, impressionistic, or expressionistic portrayals, which picture nature as mysterious and possessing awesome powers, or as horrific and frightening, Islamic art will reflect nature as described in the Qur'an, affirming its profundity, createdness, orderliness, purposefulness and subservience.⁸ An artist will not copy nature, picture it, or photograph it; neither will he adore it or reject it.

Statuesque depiction of nature in poetry, drama, image-rich fiction, paintings, or sculpture, detracts from its createdness and diverts the onlooker's attention from the Creator to adoration of the thing created. Animal sculpture as described in literature and portrayed in figurines, puppets, of statues (Pharaonic or otherwise), and ornaments along roads and in parks function in a like manner. The Prophet (ṢAAS) said: "Angels will not enter a home having a statue or a picture."⁹ He is also reported to have seen statues and said, "The worst to suffer before Allah at Judgment Day are sculptors."¹⁰ In another hadith, he explains, "They will be asked to breathe spirit into what they have created."¹¹

⁸See I. R. al Fārūqī's, "Islām and the Theory of Nature," *Islamic Quarterly*, 26 (1982), pp. 16-26.

⁹Hadith 1364 in *Saḥīḥ Muslim*.

¹⁰al Bukhārī, *Saḥīḥ al Bukhārī*, V. II (Maṭābi' al sha'b: Cairo, n.d.), Part 7, p. 215.

¹¹Ibid., p. 215.

Goal-Orientation of Art

By definition, the word *adab*, casually translated as "literature," or more precisely "non-visual art," carries within it the meaning of civilizing and disciplining. "Al *ādāb* is what the *adīb* (the non-visual artist) is endowed with for guiding people to what is praiseworthy and negating what is blameful. Its origin is supplication."¹² It carries within its definition the need to learn self-discipline and virtuous morals. The Prophet (SAAS) himself nurtured this meaning: "Be generous to your children and excel in their *adab* (teaching politeness/disciplining)."¹³ Such a goal is achievable through calling people to *īmān* and away from disbelief, the end goal being reward in the Hereafter, as opposed to present worldly reward. The procedure to be followed in such art is the Sunnah of good wisdom, and tactful advice.

Aesthetic Value

A work of art loses its value if it develops ideas and emotions contrary to man's pristine being and to nature as outlined in the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Whatever causes his fragmentation, due to an imbalance in his makeup, is aesthetically unacceptable. Works of art depicting corrupt values, such as, crime, prostitution, nudity,¹⁴ and espionage are indeed aesthetically worthless. In addition, their impact on society is dangerous, since they result in mischief, anarchy, turmoil, and evil, the cure for which is extremely costly. By contrast, works of art depicting purity, virtue, and righteous morals enhance unity and stability in the individual and society as a whole. It is only natural that Islamized art follow the Sharī'ah by depicting what is lawful and refraining from depicting what is prohibited.

If women are described in stories, for example, their virtues are their beauty; their contribution to stability in family life, their sanctified motherhood, and their implementation of the Prophet's Sunnah in their children. Their attitude, behavior, and conduct in public life are no more than an affirmation of Islamic virtues and supreme morals. Certainly, lewdness and looseness are false images of the Muslim woman's character and of her pristine, Islamic nature.¹⁵ Islamic dramatic productions do not spread disintegrated morals;

¹²al Naḥawī, p. 25.

¹³Narrated by Ibn Majah, *Kitāb al Adab*, Hadith 3671.

¹⁴Following the examples of the Delacroix and Ingres paintings.

¹⁵See Yūsuf al Qaraḍawī, *The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, n.d.), pp. 149-170 for a full explanation of what kind of freedom a Muslim woman is given in terms of virtue.

they develop strong Muslim character by relating the Muslim Ummah's present to its rich past by centering on issues of Islamic belief and morals.¹⁶

Beauty is inextricably linked to remoteness from drabness, misery, depression, or total nihilism as in existentialist or absurdist works. Allah's coronation of man as vicegerent on earth and his endowment with highly valuable morals are emphatic of the positivist role man plays as moral reformer and aesthete. The Qur'an states: "Remember Allah's signs and do not spread mischief on earth" (7:74). Furthermore, the Prophet (ṢAAS) said: "Allah is beautiful and loves beauty, arrogance is ingratitude to truth and despising people."¹⁷

Thus, aesthetic value is highly integrated in moral value. An aesthetically valuable artistic work further purifies the self. Such purification is in tune with the Qur'anic principle. "He is successful who purifies himself" (87:14), repeated in several places, as an example in, "He is successful who purifies it (the self), and a failure who corrupts it" (91:9-10). These aesthetic values are constant and stable as Qur'anic and Sunnah values. They do not fluctuate to suit the taste and whim of the audience for art, with an end toward marketing and commercialization for achievement of the utmost material benefit. Art, whether it is literary or visual, seeks expression through what is stable, to produce the desired aesthetic effect, that is, what does not conflict with virtuous principles beneficial to society and humanity at large. As such, the work will have achieved unity, as contrasted to fragmentation of the self and society—a state exemplified in the present Western or Westernized arts, which are deeply affected by pluralism. Perhaps Sayyid Quṭb's statements will be rendered more significant in this context. He said: "A work makes aesthetic art a means for emotional effect addressing pious emotions with aesthetic language."¹⁸ He also said: "Aesthetic quality makes easier access of the work to the self and a deeper effect in emotion."¹⁹

Works of art constituting description of nature consume the being as a whole—heart, mind, soul, and nerves, in remembering Allah's transcendence, mercy, and power. This is refinement and supremacy in moral and aesthetic principles, for which the artist is striving. Realizing beauty in the universe is the truest and closest method for realizing the beauty and power of its transcendent Creator.²⁰ It is, thus, fallacious to believe that a work constituting any trace of aesthetic quality has as its end mere aesthetic pleasure or taste. Aestheticism is indeed embedded in the unfolding of radiant meanings,

¹⁶See *ibid.*, pp. 306-7 for the Islamic standing on acting.

¹⁷*Saḥīḥ Muslim*, Hadith 54, p. 20.

¹⁸*al-Taṣwīr al-Fannī fī al-Qur'an* (Beirut: Dār al-Shurūq, 1982), p. 171.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 180.

²⁰See 'Imād al-Dīn Khalīl, *al-Tabī'ah fī'l-fann al-Gharbī wa'l-Islāmī*, (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-Risālah, 1981).

revealing its relation to Allah (SWT) and, it is endowed with a continuity derived from Allah's message and His Prophet's Sunnah.

Means of Expression as Related to the Aesthetic Principle

Purity of expression is an integral part of a Muslim's belief. The Qur'an clearly states: "A good word is as a good tree, its roots are firm, its branches reaching into heaven, producing fruit at every season by its Lord's permission. And the similitude of a bad word is as a corrupt tree, uprooted from the earth's surface, without establishment" (14:24-26).

Cheap, offensive insults, obscenities, verbal abuse, and impure innuendos, including immoral and criminal expressions—all are prohibited in Islam. The Prophet (SAAS) said: "The believer is not a stabber, or a curser, neither is he foul (shameless) or indecent."²¹ Verbal expression can never be effective if it is indecent; and since words are but an expression of meaning, what they express must be superior both morally and aesthetically. We may conclude that a work of art loses its aesthetic quality if it includes any defamatory language. The Prophet (SAAS) provides this screening measure: Anas (RAA) reported the Prophet to have said, "Foulness destroys beauty, while bashfulness (virtue) ornaments wherever it exists."²²

A language exhorting moral purity is only in tune with Islamic moral principles, while a language encouraging vulgarity, fornication, strife, or crime runs contrary to both the Qur'an and the Sunnah. From several *ahādīth* of the Prophet (SAAS), we may also conclude that he highly valued simplicity in language as a means of expression, whereas he cautioned against pomposity of style and haughtiness in verbal presentation. These media are rendered in the Prophet's sayings as an evil: "Exaggerators are ruined, the dearest to me, the closest in seat at Judgment Day, are the best in morals, and the most hated and remotest at Judgement Day, are the prattlers, braggarts and boasters."²³

It is a privilege to Arabic speakers that the Qur'an, the literary sublime, is in Arabic. However, translations of the Qur'an will just as efficiently demonstrate that Allah's word is written in a manner embodying purity and sublimity, high morals, and ethics. Other languages may still use the Qur'an as the supreme standard for judging what expressions may be used for artistic

²¹Muḥī al Dīn al Nawawī, *Riyad al Ṣāliḥīn min Kalam Sayyid al Mursalin* (Dimashq: Maktabah al Ghazālī, n.d.), p. 625.

²²Ibid., p. 625.

²³Ibid., p. 626.

works. Similarly, the Prophet's abundant *ahādīth* have been studied for their linguistic and stylistic excellence.

As for satirical language, it emanates from lack of respect for the object satirized. Art, including satire, opposes the Qur'anic principle expressed clearly in this *āyah*: "O you who believe, a people should not satirize another lest they be better than them" (49:11). Satirical works against enemies are allowed, however. The Prophet (ṢAAS) encouraged Hassān Ibn Thābit to satirize the mean disbelievers, since they hurt the Messenger of Allah and the Muslims.²⁴ A language communicating what Islam prohibited in conducting social relations should not figure in Islamized art. Islam has forbidden slandering and reviling by nicknames, as well as backbiting, gossiping, suspicion, etc., and, by necessity, their usage in dramatized situations that propagate such principles as enjoyable or entertaining.²⁵

Symbolic language must have its limits as well. The symbolist movement seemed to have had its roots in the teachings of Madhhab al Ta'līm. According to al Ghazālī, its adherents believed that every external meaning has an internal one. Or every apparent meaning has a hidden meaning.²⁶ This approach seems to have led to a great deal of confusion in the arts because of subjective interpretations, leading eventually to exaggerated stylization and surrealism. A safeguard for Islamized arts is a constant return to Islam's sources for guaranteeing harmony and uniformity between the symbol and the Islamic principle. For example, the color green in poetic expression can very well stand for prosperity, since the color is constantly associated with Paradise as described in the Qur'an; so is transparency with purity as in water descriptions (76:21). However, Qur'anic descriptions are quite different from human descriptions, since many times Allah (SWT) reminds us that life in Paradise is described in language comprehensible by man, yet none of its constituents is identical with those of present life.²⁷ An attempt at interpreting Qur'anic language in symbolic terms may lead to sensual blunders as is the case with Orientalist interpretations of the Qur'anic Paradise. Conclusively, the final safeguard from such misleading approaches is the measure of truth. Whatever conflicts with truth, meaning the Qur'an and Sunnah, as discussed above, is false and whatever stands in harmony with them is true and acceptable.

²⁴See al Ṣābūnī, ed. *Mukhtaṣar Tafṣīr Ibn Kathīr* (Beirut: Dār al Qur'an al Karīm, 1981), V. II., p. 664.

²⁵For a fuller account, see al Qaraḍāwī, pp. 308-33.

²⁶Abū Hamīd al Ghazālī, *al Munqidh min al Ḍalāl* (Dimashq: Maṭba'ah al Taraqqī, 1939), p. 10.

²⁷See al Ṣābūnī, V. I., p. 44.

Islamizing Literary Criticism

The scrutinizing Islamic critic will evaluate both subject matter and means of expression according to Islamic aesthetic value. He or she will be primarily concerned with artistic goal. The major concern is posed in the question "What is the work's goal?" and "Does it achieve Islamic *ādāb*?" or "Does it Islamically refine or civilize and thus benefit society?" Finally, "Is it damaging morally and spiritually?" Analysis of subject matter choice will then ensue. The critic will measure all details involved in subject-matter choice as in, for example, human relations, according to the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Whatever conflicts with Islamic Shari'ah and *ādāb* will be naturally discarded. A more detailed focus on language and image usage will follow equal criteria.

It is unimaginable, for example, that an aesthetically worthy piece of writing associates nature beauty with the filth and drabness of crime and prostitution. This would be similar to contaminating the God-given atmosphere with pollution. Nature will acquire an extremely personal and cheap meaning, conflicting with supreme aesthetic value.

Glorifying one's country or land would be another example or presentations that conflict with shari'ah and *ādāb* if that country is constantly praised in the work of art to the extent that it is the central focus in life. It will have become a worshipped idol. But if it is depicted as a haven for *'uqīdah*, a citadel for religion, a sanctuary for worshippers, a center for giving and providing, a fertile land for virtue, dignity, and Islamic prosperity, then it will have gained universal value and aesthetic refinement.

In conclusion, Islamized art is an expression of life and the universe from an Islamic perspective. It addresses universal human values and aims at elevating moral and aesthetic standards through adherence to pure Islamic sources. Although it does not reject the extant genres, it reforms and modifies the content by refining subject matter, human relation values, and linguistic and symbolic vehicles of expression by constant comparison with Islamic source values.