

Good literature and bad literature: Debate on Islam and poetry

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Abstract: As regards Islam and poetry (for that matter, literature as a whole), there exists some misunderstanding which is most commonly made by two mutually opposing groups: commentators with negative notion about Islam who state that it is a restrictive religion with no room for creativity; and devout Muslims with somewhat puritan tendency who believe that all sorts of entertainment production and consumption including poetry are prohibited in Islam. Interestingly, both the groups use similar kinds of Qur'anic and Hadith texts to pass their verdicts on the subject. This article revisits some of those revealed texts and provides the author's thoughts on the debate on Islam and poetry. It also identifies types of literature which Islam approves and some other literary productions which Islam discourages.

Keywords: Islam, Poetry, Artistic production, Literature, Moral degeneration.

Introduction

There is some amount of confusion and ambivalence regarding Islam's stand on poetry, for that matter literature as a whole. Since poetry is the earliest form of literary production, the debate on Islam and literature previously concerned this genre only. However, in the context of current literary practices, it can also be related to other forms of creative work and elements of literature, such as, novels, short stories and dramas. For the fact that poetry was the only or the most dominant form of creative expression during the time of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), the discourse on Islam and literature is generally related to the permissibility or impermissibility of poetic composition and recitation.

Around the time of the advent of the Prophet (SAW), poetry was considered "the hallmark of literate Arabs" ("Love Poetry"). Poets were highly respected and the status of the poets at that time was perhaps much higher than what the so-called cultural show-business celebrities enjoy in today's world. The Arabs cherished poetry very highly. Perhaps, the ubiquity, abundance and prevalence of poetry of that time can be compared to that of the dominance of the print and electronic media in the contemporary world. Poets then had the capability and opportunity to influence the public and could dethrone kings, or boost their fame and help perpetuate their rule.

As regards Islam and poetry, the ambivalence or misgiving is commonly attributed to the fact that the Qur'an both eulogizes and censures poetry. The Prophet (SAW)

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appreciated poetry on some occasions and stayed away from it on some other occasions. However, passing a hasty and sweeping verdict concerning Islam and poetry on the basis of some Qur'anic verses or Hadiths without taking into consideration other relevant texts may incur the risk of drawing a wrong conclusion. It is agreed upon by Muslim scholars that the Qur'an and Hadith should be understood in the totality of their message and the Islamic spirit. For the fact that Prophet Muhammad (SAW) both supported and opposed poetry, to regard his attitude to it as "shifty and opportunistic" and Islam's position on the subject as 'murky' (Kasem, n.d.) will only betray the ignorance and prejudice of those who make such senseless charges against him and against the religion.

Does Islam discourage poetry?

Apart from some Qur'anic verses and Prophetic narratives that are usually quoted to create a wedge between Islam and literary productions, one contention sometimes placed to argue that Islam is opposed to poetry is the case of the great poet Labid ibn Rabi'a (c.560 – c.661CE) who was famous, especially among the Arabs, because of his formidable creative powers and poetic gifts in the pre-Islamic (Jahiliyyah) period. And he is also represented in the *Muallaqat*.¹ It is argued that after embracing Islam he "lived more than thirty years into the era of the Hijra, but ceased to compose after his adhesion to Islam" (Gibb 1962: 41, qtd. in Montgomery 1996: 56). However, James E. Montgomery (1996: 56) regards the notion that Labid stopped composing poetry after embracing Islam as a "fabrication" and questions its "authenticity". Moreover, even if it is believed that Labid discontinued composing poetry after accepting Islam, this putative fact cannot be used as evidence to show that Islam discourages poetry; as such a decision could be interpreted as his very personal choice and an isolated case. What is more, given the fact that there was a vibrant poetic culture in Madinah during the time of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), Labid's supposed resolution to stop composing poetry cannot be used to substantiate a claim that Islam is opposed to poetry.

Poetry or any other creative writing is simply a tool and its goodness or otherwise is determined by its content, meaning, function and focus, not by its form or format in the wider sense. Accordingly, Islam approves of edifying and entertaining poetry and disapproves of those varieties of poetry that contain objectionable content or prohibited material, and promote harmful attitudes and inappropriate behaviour. For example, Islam fully supports and encourages poems which are morally and educationally appropriate and conducive to learning, and which promote honesty, sincerity, trustworthiness, compassion, patience, tolerance, contentment, fellow-feeling, mutual respect, commitment to each other and all other universal ethical-moral values. It also fosters poems that sharpen intellectual power and stimulate the human mind and imagination to useful activity such as exploring the universe and human society, seeking answers to intriguing phenomena in nature, unraveling the patterns and deeper truth underlying human existence, behaviour and relationships and thus appreciating the existence and

attributes of God and the necessity of divine revelation for the proper guidance and providential illumination of human life. Equally, poems that provide means of decent entertainment or diversion, offer relief from anxiety and escape from boredom are also acceptable and permissible in Islam. Marmaduke Pickthall (1927: 2) states: “The whole of Islam’s great work in science, art and literature is included under these two heads—aid and refreshment.” According to Pickthall, artistic productions should help promote and realize the objectives of Islam, that is, human well-being and egalitarianism, or they should provide decent entertainment to those who walk on the path of truth, justice and righteousness.

Conversely, Islam discourages poetry that begets, or drives the individual to base desires and feeds on them, as it highly disapproves of poems which can potentially lead the reader to harmful behaviour, relativism, moral degeneration, social contagion or a chaos of values. For example, in English literature there is a group of *carpe diem* poems that amiably and lightheartedly reproach the tendency of women to protect their chastity or virginity. Such poems generally impel young women to ignore conventional moral scruples, urge them to the bouts of erotic temptations and desires, and finally invite them to reciprocate man’s carnal impulses and interests, and to respond to his lust-filled sexual advances. Islam never entertains or encourages such kinds of poetry. So it is evident that Islam approves of some types of poetry and disapproves of some others, mainly on the basis of their content. However, there are some verses in the Qur’an which – if interpreted in an isolated fashion – may suggest that Islam disapproves of poetry in toto. This aspect is discussed in the following section.

Prophet or poet?

A Qur’anic verse which is often quoted to create confusion about Islam and poetry is 36: 69. It states: “And [thus it is:] We have not imparted to this [Prophet the gift of] poetry, nor would [poetry] have suited this [message]: it is but a reminder and a [divine] discourse, clear in itself and clearly showing the truth” (trans. Asad 1984: 680). Contrary to claims made by some critics of Islam, this verse does not bear any negative attitude towards poetry. It simply differentiates a prophet from a poet. The honour and standing of a prophet is incomparable to any other human callings. So, the significance of the verse is that, the message that Prophet Muhammad (SAW) received from Allah (SWT) cannot be equated with poetic creation. It needs to be appreciated as a divine mandate and assignment, and must be given its rightful place which is much higher than that of poetry. In other words, this verse was revealed to challenge a tendency of the opponents of Islam to equate Prophet Muhammad (SAW) with a poet and thus degrade his standing as a divinely appointed order to a much lower level.

Although many poets have extraordinary talents and bursts of creativity and although there is presumably one commonality between prophets and poets – that both of them are divinely gifted – prophets are without equal in human history. They had the highest

creative power and intuition and were entrusted with the most formidable task of public transformation, as religion itself is “a system of general truths which have the effect of transforming character when they are sincerely held and vividly apprehended” (Whitehead 1926: 5). The great poet philosopher, Muhammad Iqbal, puts it, “the transformation and guidance of [hu]man’s inner and outer life is the essential aim of religion” (Iqbal 2013: 1). Moreover, religion is much more comprehensive than poetry, as Iqbal (2013: 2) says: “Religion is not a departmental affair; it is neither mere thought, nor mere feeling, nor mere action; it is an expression of the whole [hu]man.” Conversely, poetry covers only one segment of human experience and verbal-intellectual ability. As William Wordsworth (1802: xii & L-Li) famously states:

I have said that each of these poems has a purpose. I have also informed my Reader what this purpose will be found principally to be: namely to illustrate the manner in which our feelings and ideas are associated in a state of excitement.

I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind.

In these two excerpts, while Wordsworth touches on the process of poetic composition, he also informs the reader about the predominant source of inspiration and mode of poetic expression. According to him, the principal source of poetry is “emotion” and “feelings”, while “tranquillity” is the breeding ground for poetic composition. What this suggests, among other things, is that a particular poet or their poetry is limited to certain faculties of human mind and nature and does not and cannot encompass all human experiences and behaviours.

Although poetry can also be used as an instrument of motivation and reform, it cannot simply be compared to or equated with the divine order of prophethood because the latter carrying the divine message has the certitude of truth and absolute value which the former does not have. In other words, adherents of Islam and other Abrahamic religions strongly believe that prophets had the truth on their side and were directly guided by God, as they had “the awesome responsibility to make known unto [hu]man the counsel of an invisible God” (Evans 2013: 29) and hence have the highest status among all His creations. So to call a prophet a poet is actually a wrong attribution and a kind of disrespect to the former. Moreover, in the context of Prophet Muhammad’s time, most poets composed *carpe diem* poems and were known for their permissive lifestyles and love of wine and women coupled with bragging, boasting and unwavering arrogance. In such a backdrop, verse 36: 69 of the Qur’an defends Prophet Muhammad (SAW)’s character and affirms that it does not correspond to any of prevailing personality traits of contemporary Arab poets.

So verse 36: 69 can be interpreted as a refutation statement that God made in the context of a prevalent climate of distrust in the prophethood of Muhammad (SAW) on the part of the detractors who were persistently sowing the seeds of doubt in the minds of people by branding him as “a soothsayer inspired by supernatural forces, or a poet inspired by a supernatural muse” (McDonald 2006: 124). In other words, this verse was revealed in response to a vicious and pathological charge against the Prophet (SAW) by the opponents of Islam who claimed that, “what he described as divine revelation was in reality an outcome of his own poetic invention” (Asad 1984 680). Similarly, the heretics also called Prophet Muhammad (SAW) a magician and epileptic (Jafri). In this regard, verses 53: 1-4 of the Qur’an are worth mentioning: “(1) Consider this unfolding [of God’s message], as it comes down from on high! (2) This fellow-man of yours has not gone astray, nor is he deluded, (3) and neither does he speak out of his own desire: (4) that [which he conveys to you] is but [a divine] inspiration with which he is being inspired” (trans. Asad 1984: 812). These verses together with verse 36: 69 refute all such charges by way of making a clear differentiation between the pitfalls, imperfections and fallibility of the poets, magicians or epileptics and the authority, integrity and infallibility of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) who received revelation from God.

Actually, by calling Prophet Muhammad (SAW) a poet, his opponents demonstrated their manifest refusal to accept him as a prophet. Importantly, if Prophet Muhammad (SAW) were considered simply a poet, it would consequentially lead to associating him with the traditional poets of that time like Imru’l-Qays (d. ca. 540 CE), which would bring disrepute to his immaculate character because Imru’l-Qays’ bon vivant “lifestyle was certainly not in keeping with the Prophet Muhammad’s moderate views” (Shawkat 2006: 124). That is perhaps the reason why, although the Qur’an is predominantly in poetic language and rhythm and most Muslim scholars regard it as “the pinnacle of literary perfection”, they have “almost unanimously rejected the idea that it is poetry” per se (Shawkat 2006: 123). Nor do Muslims tend to establish the supremacy of the Qur’an only on the basis of its poetic merits. Therefore, even though the Qur’an is incomparable as an outstanding poetic monument, it is not simply an artistic production and cannot be evaluated on that basis only.

There is an added reason why Prophet Muhammad (SAW) cannot be regarded as a poet, that is, he is not the author of the Qur’an and its poetic diction and repertoire. He is simply the primary recipient of this divine revelation from God and his duty was to transmit its message to others. So it is important that verse 36: 69 is interpreted in the context of the condition of its revelation. According to Muhammad Asad (1984: 680), this verse actually points to-

the fundamental difference between poetry – especially Arabic poetry – and divine revelation as exemplified by the Qur’an: whereas in the former the meaning is often subordinated to the rhythm and the melody of language, in the Qur’an the exact opposite is the case, inasmuch as here the choice of words,

their sound and their position in the sentence – and, hence, its rhythm and melody – are always subordinated to the meaning intended.

Are poets and students of poetry and literary texts misguided?

While verse 36: 69 marks a differentiation between the prophet and the poet, verses 26: 224-226 of the Qur'an make a critical remark on a certain group of poets. Conversely, the verse that follows, that is, verse 26: 227 commemorates another group of poets. So this set of four verses put together constitutes the most pertinent statement on Islam and poetry. The verses read:

(224) And as for the poets - [they, too, are prone to deceive themselves: and so, only] those who are lost in grievous error would follow them. (225) Art thou not aware that they roam confusedly through all the valleys [of words and thoughts],² (226) and that they [so often] say what they do not do [or feel]? (227) [Most of them are of this kind –] save those who have attained to faith, and do righteous deeds, and remember God unceasingly, and defend themselves [only] after having been wronged, and [trust in God's promise that] those who are bent on wrong doing will in time come to know how evil a turn their destinies are bound to take! (trans. Asad 1984: 575)

Isolating the first three verses from the fourth one may communicate a wrong message regarding Islam and poetry. Actually, these verses need to be understood in relation to verse 36: 69 which rules out any notion that the Qur'an is simply a poetic composition of Muhammad. While verse 36: 69 provides a more general statement against the manipulative confusion of revelation with poetry by the opponents of Islam, verses 26: 224-227 mention more specifics concerning the debate and elaborate upon a salient difference between conventional poetry of the time and the uniqueness of the Qur'anic revelation. Whereas contemporary Arab poetry was the result of "confused or aimless and often self-contradictory ... words and thoughts" of the poet, the Qur'an is "free from all inner contradictions ... and the vagueness often inherent in poetry" (Asad 1984: 575). Muhammad Iqbal (2013: 1) describes the difference between religion (the Islamic message) and poetry thus:

Religion, in its more advanced forms, rises higher than poetry. It moves from individual to society. In its attitude towards the Ultimate Reality it is opposed to the limitations of human; it enlarges his claims and holds out the prospect of nothing less than a direct vision of Reality.

However, while negating the synonymity or equivalence of revelation and poetry, verses 26: 224-227 also point to an alternative poetic tradition that is free from any moral jeopardy, decay or ambiguities. It emanates from imaginative minds steeped in faith, expresses the finest sentiments and noblest feelings of human life and aims at the glorification of God and at the celebration of those who walk in the way of God and fight

for truth and justice. Such poets use poetry to glorify their transcendent Creator and not their own selves or cult or ethnicity. The poets and litterateurs of this kind put their creative verve and energy in the service of humanity and not in the promotion of their own selves or in the accumulation of personal fortunes.

Importantly, verse 26: 225 points to an important contrast between prophets and most poets in the sense that, invariably all the prophets received revelation and at the same time pursued a divine mission to establish truth and justice on earth and had to face enormous difficulties and brave opposition from society. Accordingly, they had to maintain a life of activism and pushed forward their progressive reform agenda of social justice as well as vigorous critique of injustice. They practiced what they preached, which is not the case with most poets who simply express their emotional outbursts through poetry, and may sometimes make noble statements but make little effort or sacrifice to establish them.

The reason why the Qur'an denounces a group of poets is that, at the time of its revelation there were many poets, as there are now, who glorified war and provoked various tribes to engage in hostilities and, as mentioned before, many of them wrote *carpe diem* poems. The same goes with a group of contemporary creative writers who employ their literary career to spread obscenity and depravity, promote (neo-)imperialist ideology and aspirations, and provoke racist attitudes and behaviours. Such writers also give legitimacy to cultural aggression and propagate immoral doctrines and libertine practices among people through their artistic productions. So the Qur'anic denigration of poetry is not unconditional and absolute, as, obviously, the relevant verses mentioned above make a clear distinction between good poetry and bad poetry.

What is more, verse 26: 227 refers to an important responsibility of the good poet "who believe and do good and remember Allah much." Such poets have a duty to vindicate themselves after they as well as their community people have been wronged. In a world where people (mostly Muslims and the underprivileged) are suffering and at a time when the surface of the globe is being wet by the blood of the oppressed, poets and litterateurs or any creative artists with adequate concern for humanity cannot feel complacent by composing literary works only to entertain the lazy minds, feed the earthly and carnal nature of the masses or to sustain the self-centred, narcissistic cultural logic of corporate greed.

Poetry or literature should tell the world about the predicament of the oppressed and galvanise the sincere hearts to find ways to remedy. In this respect, the Irish literary practices of the early twentieth century are worth mentioning. When writers like Lady Gregory (1852-1932), W B Yeats (1865-1939), John Millington Synge (1871-1909) and James Joyce (1882-1941) realized that the political aspirations of the Irish people to liberate Ireland from centuries-old British colonial grip "seemed blocked" they employed their creative energy to establish and maintain a vibrant literary and cultural environment and thus to narrativise their very much Irish existence and experiences and to promote a

distinct Irish literary culture. Likewise, in the twenty first century when Muslims are in a more or less similar condition, literary artists in the Islamic world should employ all their creative energy to represent a distinct culture based on truth and justice and to tell their stories in order to create a meaning of their identity and existence and of their sense of belonging. Such a literary tradition will help resist imperialism's cultural domination and infiltration and assert the identity and values of indigenous peoples.

Poets steeped in faith and urge for justice

As stated earlier, isolating the first three verses of the Qur'an (26: 224-226) from the remaining one (26: 227), may lead to misunderstandings about Islam's approach to literary work and trigger an imprecise conclusion that Islam summarily discourages all creative productions. Such a stance may go against the practice of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) who supported a vibrant literary culture among his companions. For example, there were some illustrious poetry reciters among his companions including Hassan ibn Thabit, Amir ibn Al-Akwa and Anjashah (may God be pleased with them all). During the turbulent and trying period of the Battle of Trench when the Prophet (SAW) along with his companions was carrying away earth to make a ditch, he recited poetic verses of his own and thus prayed to God for help and strength for his companions. English rendering of one such verse reads:

O Allah, there is no life except the life of the Hereafter, so forgive the Ansar (Helpers) and the Muhajirin³ [Migrants]. (Bukhari & Muslim, qtd. in *Mishkatul Masabeeh*, 2004: 32)

In reply, his companions reiterated their loyalty and resilience by reciting another poetic verse full of devotion and a strong sense of self-sacrifice:

We are the ones who have pledged allegiance to Muhammad to make jihad [noble efforts] for as long as we live. (Bukhari & Muslim, qtd. in *Mishkatul Masabeeh*, 2004: 32)

Importantly, Prophet Muhammad (SAW)'s love of decent, entertaining poetry and his encouragement to his companions to recite poems on journey should dismiss any doubt that Islam is opposed to poetry. In Islamic history, there have always been poets steeped in faith in every age who kept on inspiring people around them and beyond to live a virtuous life. One classical example is Maulana Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi (1207-1273 CE) who was "a zealous upholder of the [Divine] Law" and whose poetry demonstrates "a most ecstatically uninhibited love of the Divine" and the "principles of eternal goodness and eternal truth" (Banani, 1994: 3). Although imprints of Sufism are especially apparent in his poetry, one big "difference between a "God-intoxicated" Sufi like Rumi and some Sufi-enamored representatives of our generation is that while Rumi strove to 'annihilate' his 'self,' others assert theirs" (Banani 1994: 4). In other words, true poets do not use their poetic talents to realize egoistic and individualistic interests, rather

they devote their creative and imaginative gifts and abilities for higher goals. As Iqbal (2013: 1) states:

What is the character and general structure of the universe in which we live? Is there a permanent element in the constitution of this universe? How are we related to it? What place do we occupy in it, and what is the kind of conduct that befits the place we occupy? These questions are common to religion, philosophy, and higher poetry.

Islam encourages what Iqbal calls “higher poetry” and discourages the varieties of poetry that are intended to serve base ends. Importantly, Prophet Muhammad (SAW) had his own official poets such as Hassan b. Thabit, Abd Allah b. Rawahah and Ka’b b. Malik who “acted as [his] court poets and responded to the lampoons of the Qurashite poets attacking [him] and Islam” (Montgomery 1996: 50-51). Moreover, the Prophet (SAW) made a clear statement saying that some poetry is wisdom (Bukhari qtd. in *Mishkatul Masabeeh*, 2004: 31). Evidently, Islam does not discourage “higher poetry” that carries wisdom and promotes good causes irrespective of the religious identity of the poet. In other words, Islam does not differentiate between Islamic poets and poets adhering to other faiths/ideologies, as it is more concerned with the content of a specific poem rather than with the religious or ideological affiliation of the poet. Umaiya ibn Abu Salt was a non-Muslim poet of the Jahiliyyah period, but the Prophet (SAW) highly regarded his poetry, as the following Hadiths testify:

‘Amr b. Sharid reported his father as saying: One day when I rode behind Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him), he said (to me): Do you remember any Poetry of Umayya b. Abu Salt. I said: Yes. He said: Then go on. I recited a couplet, and he said: Go on. Then I again recited a couplet and he said: Go on. I recited one hundred couplets (of his poetry) (Muslim qtd. in *Mishkatul Masabeeh*, 2004: 31).

Abu Hurairah reported that Allah’s Messenger (SAW) said: “The truest words spoken by a poet were the words of [the pre-Islamic poet] Labid who said: ‘Lo, everything apart from God is vain and perishable.’ And Umaiya bin Abu Salt was about to become a Muslim (in his poetry)” (Bukhari, Hadith no. 5795).

Obviously, this particular poet promoted values that are in full compliance with the teachings of Islam; hence, the Prophet made such an approving statement about the content of his poetry. While the Prophet appreciated decent poetry, he also disapproved of poetry that goes against widely-accepted moral, Islamic values. For example,

Abu Sa`id Khudri reported: We were going with Allah’s Messenger (SAW). As we reached the place (known as) Arj there met (us) a poet who had been reciting poetry. Thereupon Allah’s Messenger (may peace be upon him) said: Catch the satan or detain the satan, for filling the belly of a man with pus is better than stuffing his brain with poetry (Muslim, Hadith no. 6032).

The Prophet (SAW) in this incident showed his disapproval not of the genre of poetry, rather of the message and the impact of a particular creative production on the audience. So the Islamic view on poetry is largely based on the content of poetry and not on the form. It is not because of the genre itself that Islam approves of some poems and disapproves of some others. Rather it is the content that they carry what makes poetry good or bad. In other words, the ruling of Islam concerning poetry is determined by the basic tenets of the Islamic ethical system and core values. Some poetry is good because of the goodness it carries, while some other poetry is bad because of the evil it produces and tempts the reader to do. That is to say, poetry is commendable or even mandatory when used for purposes of “conveying truth, upholding justice, spreading virtue and good” or for decent and heartening entertainment; conversely, it becomes abominable when it is appropriated to spread obscenity or to spread “falsehood, injustice, corruption, and evil” (“Love Poetry”) or is misused as a means of lewd and indecent entertainment.

Conclusion

Islam encourages poetry and other forms of literary productions that are conducive to building a morally and religiously healthy society and are beneficial for individual, familial and community life. Conversely, it discourages creative works that sustain base desires, serve ulterior motives of personal gain or glory, and further the spread of endemic corruption at various levels of human life. That is to say that, there are two types of poetic works: didactic and belletristic. Islam supports the former.⁴ As is the case with various branches of modern western knowledge, there is much in various literary traditions that Islam, to use Fazlur Rahman’s (1988: 5) words, “will accept as its own” and “while no doubt, there is much that” Islam “will reject as well.”

In the English literary tradition, Sir Philip Sidney’s *An Apology for Poetry* (or *The Defence of Poesy* [1595]) is perhaps the most eloquent and persuasive vindication of poetry and of other forms of creative writing. However, even in this fervid and passionate endorsement of literary productions, Sidney points to their potential abuse, as he states:

Nay, truly, though I yield that poesy may not only be abused, but that being abused, by the reasons of his sweet charming force, it can do more hurt than any other army of words, [...] that whatsoever being abused doth most harm, being rightly used (and upon the right use, each thing receives [its] title) doth most good (Sidney, 1989: 104).

In regard to the use of creative literary production, what Sidney says resonates with the Islamic view on the subject to a great extent. While there is immense potential in literary productions to deliver good messages, literary practitioners and critics should also be vigilant about the possible harms that poetry (and for that matter literature as a whole) can cause. This is the very reason why both God in the Qur’an and Prophet Muhammad in Hadith literature warn against potential moral and religious hazards that some poetry may

entail. And this cautionary admonition in Islamic teachings to the humanity to beware of possible pitfalls of poetry should not lead to sweeping generalizations and to an argument that Islam disapproves of poetry. Such a contention cannot be substantiated for various reasons. Prophet Muhammad was very much fond of poetry, was greeted with poetry upon his arrival in Madinah and encouraged his companions to recite poetry when he traveled with them and most importantly he had his own official poets. All these facts suggest that Islam, far from disapproving of poetry, very much encourages it provided poetic compositions do not endorse attitudes, ideas, beliefs and values antagonistic to Islam.

Notes

- 1 Muallaqat refers to the seven classical pre-Islamic Arabic poems which were hung on the walls of Ka'ba in Makkah and have been regarded as the best and most preeminent poetic compositions that have been carried down from pre-Islamic period of Arabia.
- 2 One possible interpretation of this section of the verse can be: "they rave in every valley" and "exercise their imagination on all subjects indiscriminately" (Montgomery, 51).
- 3 Muhajirun are those companions of Prophet Muhammad who had to migrate from Makkah to Madinah because of oppression by the opponents of Islam, and Ansar are his companions in Madinah who helped and gave shelter to the migrants.
- 4 For more details on the debate about belletristic literature or the motto of 'art for art's sake', please see Hasan (2013).

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