

Plato's Ontology and Hali's Teleology: The Construction of the Muslim identity in Muqaddama-e-Sher-o-Shairi

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ABSTRACT:

In this article, the author has discussed how Altaf Hussain Hali, the first critic writing in Urdu language, can be located in the western tradition of literary criticism? And how his contribution becomes significant in imagining and circulating the configurations of Muslim identity in the colonized culture of the subcontinent? The author has drawn upon Said's idea of colonial othering in *Culture and Imperialism* to show that Hali, as the colonized subject, "the civilizational other" in British colonialism is faced with the arduous task of defining the parameters of his cultural identity. Said argues that the west considers the colonized subject as "other" and inherently inferior to imperial culture. Furthermore, the west also imagines its history as linear without internal contradictions and fissures. This monolithic view of historical tradition is to be resisted by the native intellectual. And Hali does it by searching the roots of Urdu poetry in Arabian and Persian cultures. Hence he comes up with a counter narrative of identity which can be an antidote to colonially instilled cultural inferiority.

Key Words: Colonization, ontology, teleology, identity, civilizational other.

In this research paper, I intend to explore the idea of tradition as conceived by Altaf Hussein Hali (1837-1914) in his seminal work *Muqaddama-e-Shero-Shairi, (Introduction to Poetry)* (1893). The book is considered the first ever written treatise on the nature and scope of poetry in Urdu language. As a post- Rebellion text, it deals with the political question of writing poetry in colonial times. And here, we have a resonance of Platonic dilemma of the utility of poetry in an ideal state. Hence the word tradition in my research design designates two important issues. Firstly it refers to the Plato's critique of the role of poet in an ideal republic; secondly it questions the genesis of the tradition of Urdu poetry. My argument is that in Hali these two versions of traditions are linked to each other through the umbilical cord of Muslim identity.

The role of intellectual or a poet during colonial times has been of pivotal importance for the colonized cultures. He has to act as a leader or guide to steer his people through turbulent times of history. Poetry, more than other genres of literature, has performed this function successfully in many colonized societies. It not only helped preserving the indigenous cultural traditions but also created an aesthetic space where the subjugated people could express themselves and find ways of resistance. For Hali, the post Rebellion period was fraught with despair and pessimism. It was under the influence of Ali Garh Movement that Hali sought to redefine the role of the poet and poetry in the subcontinent. Though he does not seem to advocate a distinct Muslim poetic narrative of resistance yet as I will show in the following pages, the desire of a Muslim political renaissance remains at the heart of his poetics. Commenting upon the post Rebellion options that were available to Hali and his contemporaries, Francis Pritchett observes:

The process of reconstruction had to start with basic pragmatic concerns: finding a job, finding a way to live in the new world. In the years immediately following the Rebellion, Azad and Hali had to cut their coats according to their cloth. And since India was now to belong to directly to queen empress, it was more and more clear that the only cloth available would be imported fabric.(31)

Hali's project was to reconcile the demands of indigenous and colonial episteme. The imported fabric/knowledge demanded for a modernist secular outlook on life whereas the indigenous population and especially Muslims felt secure in the memories of a glorious past. In their imaginary, religion played a far more important role than was allowed by secularist colonialist outlook. Since they had been deprived of political power, they felt more secure in the ritualistic participation in the private space. Hence the artistic and cultural space is marked with a degree of ambivalence, skepticism and evasion. The poetic tradition that Hali had inherited reflected this evasion. Therefore, he felt the need for a complete break away from the tradition of Urdu poetry that envisaged itself in the spatial metaphors of Lucknow and Delhi. In *Mussadas*, we find Hali's disillusionment with the state of Urdu poetic tradition:

That foul collection of verses and odes, which sinks worse than a cesspool, which has an impact in the world no less than an earthquake, and which makes the angles in heaven feel shame at it, has been the ruin of learning and religion. Such is the role among our arts and sciences of the art of literature. (Cited in Ralph Russel 125)

In his critique, Hali laments that learning and religion are badly affected by the Urdu poetic tradition. This would certainly infuriate the Lucknow and Delhi schools who took pride in being the torchbearers of this cultural heritage. Like Plato, Hali's objection is of epistemological nature. It questions the utility and scope of poetry in the process of knowledge production. And it brings us back to the centuries old Platonic debate on the nature and scope of poetry. By sharing Plato's objection to poetry, Hali locates himself within the western episteme that questions the utility of poetry in state structure.

Plato was against the poets because he did not trust the knowledge they produced. Being an idealist i.e. he believed the idea to be an eternal, unchanging, essentialist and autotelic reality, he condemned the poets because they did not have an access to reality. For Plato, Reality is transcendental, and the world we live in is an imperfect copy of the ideal world of ideas. When a poet writes something about this world, he is removed from reality because the world itself is an imperfect copy of the ideal world of ideas. In Book 10 of *Republic*, through Socrates, he observes:

Then must we not infer that all these poetical individuals, beginning with Homer, are not only imitators: they copy images of virtue and the like, but they truth they never reach? The poet is like a painter who, as we have already observed, will make a likeness of a cobbler though he understands nothing of cobbling; and his picture is good enough for those who know more than he does, and judge only by colour and figures. (439)

Plato's theory of mimesis (copy) is a much debated idea in the western scholarship and it continued to influence the subsequent

generations of literary theorists. To prove his point further, Plato gives the most celebrated poetic analogy of men in caves which defines not only what is knowledge but also in turn proves that poetic knowledge is far removed from reality. The men in caves are hypothetical figures whose necks are tied and they cannot look backward. Fire is burning at their back and it casts dancing reflection on the fore. For them, the reflection is the only reality, forgetful of the fact that they don't have access to the source. And if they are brought into the sun, they would realize how faulty their knowledge was. The poet, according to Plato, is thus removed from reality as the men in caves are. And the knowledge he produces is not trustworthy because it is a copy of a copy. In this context, David Daiches observes:

Plato's primary objection to poetry might be called an epistemological one—it stems from his theory of knowledge. If true reality consists of ideas of things, of which individual objects are but reflections and imitations, then anyone who imitates those individual objects is imitating an imitation, and so producing something which is still removed from reality. (Daiches 20)

Plato banishes poets from his ideal state because what they produce is a pack of lies. And their writings also have debilitating effect on the youth because they show gods with baser feelings and thus at times commit blasphemy. Only philosopher has an access to the ultimate reality and he is entitled to guide the nation. Poetry could never recover from Platonic attacks and the rest of the history of literary theory is only an apology to Plato's objections raised against poetry.

As quoted earlier, Hali shares Platonic critique so far as it questions the efficacy and utility of poetry in knowledge production and improving general moral standards. But, unlike Plato, he does not assign the role of reformation to philosophers. He argues that by banishing the poet, Plato did a disservice to the moral realm of human existence. Poet alone could be the best teacher for inculcating high moral values. In *Muqaddama*, Hali observes:

Had Plato succeeded in banishing poets from his ideal Republic, he wouldn't have done any service to moral values. Rather, he would have created a soulless, selfish society struggling only for ulterior motives.... That is why the whole world accords respects to poets who have given such imaginative power to humanity which either in itself is virtue or it takes us towards virtue. (15, Translation mine).

Hali subverts Platonic episteme by challenging Plato's argument that poetry is fatal for teaching moral values. On the contrary, he argues that poetry motivates us to follow higher moral values. Teaching and preaching has been done from pulpits for centuries. But usually the people don't feel motivated towards virtue. Poetry not only preaches but also gives us impetus to improve our moral being. It is necessary for the spiritual rebirth. Hence the platonic argument loses its currency when adjudged in the contest of the theory of motivation. A philosopher can only teach or theorize. But he cannot motivate the people towards higher moral values. It is interesting to note that Hali has used the puritan weapon of reformation against themselves. Explaining the relationship between poetry and morality, Hali observes:

Poetry can ignite baser human emotions. In the same way, it can give us spiritual happiness. And there is no need to explain the relationship between spiritual happiness and moral values. Although poetry does not directly teach moral values yet it would be justified to call it a moral teacher. That is why mystics consider *sma* (on the shrines of mystics, a group of artists sing songs in chorus and people dance to their tunes), of which poetry is the major component as a means of self-cleansing and love of God.

(14 Translation mine)

Hali eulogizes poetry for its capacity to teach and move to virtue. By taking this theoretical position, Hali has come closer to Sir Philip Sidney (1554-15860), the English critic and literary theorist who tried to resolve the Platonic dilemma by assigning the role of moral guide to poetry. Before moving on to discuss Sidney's position on the role of poetry in human life, it is pertinent to remember how Aristotle rejected Platonic objections by introducing his famous theory of imitation.

According to Aristotle, all art forms imitate life. And poetry is an art form that imitates in words. But this imitation is neither a slavish imitation nor a photographic representation of reality. Poet participates in the essence of things and presents a world which is better than real one. Thus poetry does not function as history to tell how certain things happened. Instead of dealing with reality, it draws on probability—something both history and philosophy are unable to do. Explaining this point further, David Daiches observes:

It is when he comes to discuss relationship between poetry and history that Aristotle deals with Plato's attack on

poetry as an imitation of an imitation its most damaging blow. The poet does not simply imitate or represent particular events or situations which he happens to have noted or invented; he handles them in such a way that he brings out their universal and characteristic elements thus illuminating the essential nature of some event or situation whether or not what he is telling is historically true. (Daiches 37)

Poetry thus becomes more philosophic by displaying divine powers to create something that does not exist in nature. Aristotle does not say much about the motivating power of poetry. His theory focuses the cathartic effect of poetry that after watching a tragedy, the audience feelings are raised to the highest pitch and then brought down to make them emotionally stable citizens of polis (city state). In Hali's theorization, this thing is done by *sama* or the dancing on religious hymns or songs. The participants in a *sama* go through an aesthetic experience which terminates in having a cathartic effect on the listeners and dancers. Thus both in Hali and Aristotle, listening to *sama* or watching a tragedy becomes a celebration whose metaphysical boundaries are defined by its religious affinities. And it also serves the purpose of giving emotionally stable citizens to society.

Aristotle outlook towards poetry was of ontological nature (Daiches 24). Sidney extends the argument further by assigning the role of moral guide to poetry and its power to move to virtuous action. Poetry, according to Sidney produces the golden world which is far better than the real, brazen world of nature. This golden world contains eternal values. By presenting this golden world, poet allures the reader towards copying it. Here we have a resonance of Hali's idea of spiritual

rebirth. In this sense, poet becomes a maker or a creator. His world though a representation of real one does not follow historical or philosophic model of representation. Philosophy teaches through dry argumentation. History teaches through precepts or past examples. Only a poet re/creates by borrowing from nature but not producing the exact replica of reality. It is a re/presented reality that reaches readers through the channels of imagination. Hence for its appreciation, a certain temperament is needed. Sidney further argues that poetry is the food for tender stomachs. In *Apology for Poetry*, he establishes the epistemic superiority of poetry over history and philosophy and concludes in the following words:

For conclusion, I say the philosopher teacheth, but he teacheth obscurely, so as the learned only can understand him, that is to say he teacheth them that are already taught. But the poet is food for tenderest stomachs; the poet is indeed the right popular philosopher. (263)

Sidney rejects the philosophic elitism that wisdom can be accessed by only a select few. His is a more democratic outlook on the process of knowledge production and its circulation. Hali also shares this theoretical strand by making human society as an indissoluble link between poet and the creative process. Poetry is not created in an imaginary realm of Olympian heights where people like Plato are capacitated to appreciate knowledge. It is created within a society. Poet is not removed from the immediate socio political demands of his/her society. Poetry of a specific period is a reflection of its society. It is thus cultural criticism of life. In *Muqaddama*, he comments that it is an established principal that poetry responds to the cultural changes in such a way that the changes in the thoughts, habits and taste of a

society find a true reflection in its poetry (15). In portraying a society in its cultural totality, poetry develops an inseparable link with the cultural past of a nation. It not only re/presents a society but in itself becomes part of a poetic tradition that is rooted in the past as well as in the present—a new marker of the cultural identity of a people.

The question of responding to past becomes all the more important in colonial times because the poet is also engaged with the process of cultural resistance. He establishes his own distinct cultural identity which might otherwise be eroded by colonial cultural assimilation. The colonial other i.e. the native, has to invoke the Muse of the past to confront the colonizer. Edward W.Said (1935-2003), in *Culture and Imperialism* theorizes the role of past and its tradition in establishing colonial hegemony and modes of indigenous resistance:

Throughout the exchange between Europeans and their “others” that began systematically half a millennium ago, the one idea that has scarcely varied is that there is an “us” and a “them”, each quite settled, clear unassailably self-evident. The division goes back to Greek thought about barbarians, but whoever originated this kind of “identity” thought by nineteenth century it had become the hall mark of imperialist cultures as well as those cultures trying to resist the encroachment of Europe. (xxviii)

In Said's taxonomy, Hali could be seen belonging to “the civilizational other: engaged with the process of preserving and asserting his identity. Said further stresses the point that the othering is also a site of contestation on which both the conflicting discourses of colonizer and the colonized engage and challenge each other. It would be pertinent to quote T.S. Eliot's version of poetic tradition which

places English poetry in the meta narrative of European poetic tradition. According to him, the modern poet must inculcate a sense of tradition. But tradition does not mean a slavish copy of the past. One has to participate in the process of inculcating this tradition which involves not only the pastness of the past but its presence also. He theorizes the monolithic western poetic tradition in the following words:

Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited and if you want it you must obtain it with great labour. It involves in the first place a historical sense...the historical sense compels a man to write not only with his own generation in his bones, but a feeling that the whole of the literature of the Europe from Homer and within it the whole literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and makes a simultaneous order.
(Eliot 14)

The tendency to consider English literature as part of the European tradition is what Said calls the imperialist project of othering. It ignores the fissures and contradictions inherent in the idea of a monolithic European literary and cultural tradition. It forces the reader to imagine a linear European history which is a prerequisite for the imperial subjugation of alien cultures.

Hali also theorizes the idea of tradition. And I argue that his theorization is strategically important because it has to establish a mode of resistance for Indian subjects. If Eliot begins the European literary tradition from Homer, Hali traces the roots of Poetry in Arab culture. Although his subject is to define the role and scope of poetry in human life yet he invariably refers to Islamic and Arabic poetry. He constantly

draws on Arabic and Persian poetic traditions to differentiate between good and bad poetry. And how poetry in colonial times can be reformed? Thus if Plato's approach is ontological then Hali's approach is teleological. He sees the possibility of national rebirth through his theory and practice of poetry. In this context, Masood Ashraf Raja argues that after Hali and Azad's intervention, Urdu literature becomes synonymous with Muslim literature and its utilitarian emphasis forces future writers to write to and for the Muslims of India and the Muslim existential dilemma within the British system. (51)

Conclusion:

Through my arguments, I have endeavored to prove that in the tradition of Urdu criticism, Hali creates an indigenous counter narrative of identity. As a colonized subject, he drinks deep at the fountainhead of western scholarship but then appropriates it for his nationalist's demands. He partly agrees with Plato on the utilitarian aspect of poetry but rejects him on the same grounds by declaring poet as an ideal teacher who can move to virtuous action. Wordsworth also considers the poet as guide, a prophet and a moral teacher. Hali does not share the romantic rejection of society as proposed by Wordsworth and Coleridge. In Hali, Poetry enjoys the highest esteem because of its relationship with antiquity and its power to motivate for higher moral aims. Since, as said earlier, his poetic tradition is rooted in Arabian and Persian culture, he ends up making his treatise a case for the Muslim identity in colonial cultural paradigm.

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