

6. The Master-Piece of the Master-Pieces

In our world almost every nation has some literary works, but among these works just a few are counted as “masterpiece.” To give an opinion about the ancient master-pieces of Greek literature or of the present-day literary works of European languages such as Italian, English or French, is the work of the experts of those languages. I intend to restrict my writing to the master-pieces of Arabic and Persian languages with which I am familiar.

Of course, an accurate opinion about the master-pieces of these two languages also can only be given by the experts; but it is an accepted fact that almost all the literary master-pieces are concerned with one particular subject or another.

In other words, their excellence and beauty lies in their specific domain, and if the same person, who has produced a master-piece in one particular subject, attempts to work in a different area, his work will not be a master-piece—because he has stepped outside his domain.

To clarify the matter, let us have a look at the masterpieces of Persian literature. To name a few, there are Sufic or gnostic poems (ghazal-e 'irfani), poems of exhortation and counsel (pand wa andarz), simple poems (ghazal-e 'adi), spiritual and gnostic allegories (tamthilat-e ruhi wa 'irfani), epic poems (hamasah), elegiacs (qa'idah), etc; but none of our Persian poets was able to produce a literary master-piece embracing all these different literary forms.

Hafiz was famous for his Sufic poems. Sa'di for his exhorting and simple poems, Firdawsi for his epic poems, Mawlawi for his allegories and profound spiritual thoughts, Khayyam was famous for his pessimism towards philosophy and Nizami for some other art.

Because of the difference in thoughts and in choice of subjects in their verses, these poets cannot be compared to each other. The only tribute we can pay to them is to remark that each of them was a master in his own particular poetic form. And occasionally if they attempted to step out of their domain, great difference appeared in their writings. The same thing can be observed among the Arab poets, both in Islamic and pre-Islamic eras.

It has been mentioned in the Nahju 'I-Balaghah that once 'Ali was asked, "Who is the best among the Arab poets?" He answered, "They did not ride in the same domain so that one could know the result at the finishing line. But if I am forced to choose one of them, then Imrau 'I-Qays is the best." (Saying No. 461)

In his *Sharh* on the Nahju 'I-Balaghah, under the above mentioned sentence, Ibn Abi al-Hadid writes the following story with reference: 'Ali used to invite people in the holy month of Ramadan and offer meal to them, but he himself never ate from it. After dinner he used to deliver a lecture and preach them. In one of the nights, over dinner, the guests were talking about poets. After eating, 'Ali said in his lecture that, "The standard of your deed is your religion; the source of your protection is your piety; good behaviour is your jewel; patience is the protecting limit of your prestige." Then he faced Abu al-Aswad¹ – who was among those who were talking about the poets – and asked, "What is your opinion about the best poet?" Abu al-Aswad recited a poem of Abu Dawud Ayadi and said, "This man is the best poet." 'Ali said, "You are mistaken, it is not so."

As the audience saw that 'Ali was interested in the subject of their discussion, all requested him to give his opinion. He said, "Judging in this matter is wrong. If they had been working in the same field, it would have been possible to prefer one of them and name him the best. But if it is necessary for me to express my opinion, then I say that the one who composes a poem without considering any personal desire, and without being overcome by fear of anyone is to be preferred to the others." When the people inquired about such a person, he replied, "Imrau 'I-Qays."²

It is quoted that Yunus, the famous grammarian (of Arabic language), was asked about the best poet of the jahiliyyah (pre-Islamic) period. He answered, "Imrau al-Qays when he is astride a horse i.e., when his courageous feelings are aroused in battle-field and he is inspired to recite epic poems; an-Nabighah when fleeing i.e., when he is afraid and wants to flee in order to save his life; and Zubayr bin Salmah when he is delighted." Yunus wanted to say that these poets had ability in specific areas and had produced master-pieces in the related subjects; he wanted to indicate that each one of them was the master of his own domain, but not a genius in other areas.

¹. (translator's note) Abu al-Aswad ad-Dawa'ili (d. 69 A.H.) is one of the tabi'in (the disciples of the Prophet's companions) and a follower of Imam 'Ali. He is known as the first person to have written a risalah (treatise) on rules of Arabic grammar (an-nahw) which he had been taught by Imam 'Ali (a.s.). See Ta'assu 'sh-Shi'ah li 'ulum al-Islam of Sayyid Hasan a'adr, pp. 40-60; Muallifu 'sh-Shi'ah fi 'adri 'l-Islam of Sharafu 'd-Din al-Musawi, pp. 20-29; al-Fihrist of Ibn Nadim, Beirut n.d., pp. 59-62.

². Ibn Abi al-Hadid, op. cit., vol. 20, p. 153

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