

7. The Universality of Imam 'Ali's Personality

One of the distinguished qualities of the sayings of Imam 'Ali, in the Nahju 'I-Balaghah, is their comprehensiveness and universality, they are not limited to a particular subject, or a specific time or place. 'Ali, using his own expression, had not ridden in one arena; he had raced his horse in various fields, occasionally some subjects were antithetical.

Indeed Nahju 'I-Balaghah is a master-piece not limited to a particular form or topic like exhortation and epic poems, or lyric and love poems. It is an all-embracing master-piece or in other words, it is the master-piece of the master-pieces.

The writings which are master-piece in a particular subject – although few in number – can be found in the literary world; and likewise, many writings covering various subjects, but in a simple style can also be found. But the writings and sayings which can be regarded as a literary master-piece and at the same time cover various subjects is the unique quality of the Nahju 'I-Balaghah.

Apart from the Qur'an, is there any multi-dimensional master-piece like the Nahju 'I-Balaghah? Speech is a mirror which reflects the horizons of the speaker's perception, it is the representative of the soul. The speech which is not limited to a particular world, shows that the soul of speaker is also not limited to one world; and 'Ali's soul, indeed, was not limited to a particular world, it was everywhere free from the context of time and age; or as the Gnostics say – 'Ali was a Perfect Man, a Complete Existence, comprehending the whole existence and the possessor of all perfect virtues; and so the sayings of 'Ali are also multidimensional.

The universality of the sayings and the soul of 'Ali is not a newly discovered fact. It is a matter which aroused surprise even centuries before. Sayyid Radhi, who was aware of this fact, says: One of the distinctions of 'Ali (peace be upon him) – in which he was unique and no one was his equal – is that if a person, without thinking about 'Ali's personality and prestige in society, considers his sayings concerning piety, exhortation and advices, he will surely have no doubt that these sayings come from a person who has no share except in piety and has no work except meditation and prayers, as if he had secluded himself in a lonely place in a foot of a mountain, neither hearing any sound except his own breathing nor

seeing anything save himself. He will not believe that such divinely exalted sayings are from a person who penetrates the enemies' army in battle with a heavenly sword, chops the necks, defeats the braves and returns from the battle-field while blood is running from his sword, and that at the same time he was the most pious and the most humble worshipper." Then the Sayyid adds, "I have talked over this matter with my friends, whose surprise knew no limits when faced with this fact."

Shaykh Muhammad 'Abduh was also attracted, and deeply affected, by this aspect of the Nahju 'l-Balaghah, and he says in the preface of his commentary that the changing screens of the Nahju 'l-Balaghah and its power to keep the reader informed of various subjects, interested him most.

Imam 'Ali's soul was indeed a very comprehensive and multi-dimensional soul, a distinguishing quality for which he has always been praised. He was a just ruler, a worshipper who stayed up all night; in mihrab he wept, in the battle-field he smiled; he was a disciplined soldier, an able commander, a teacher and an orator, a judge and a jurist, a farmer and a writer – all at one and the same time. He was a perfect human being, familiar with the whole spiritual world. Safiu 'd-Din al-Hilli (fl. ca., 8th c. A.H.) says about Imam 'Ali (peace be upon him):

In your virtues contraries have come together,
And for this antagonists have paid respect to you;
The ascetic, the patient, the brave, the ruler,
The warrior, the saint, the kind, the pauper,
Those traits which never met in one man together,
And the like of them no 'abd of God has attained ever;
A refined morality faced with which the gentle breeze felt ashamed,
And a strength which makes the solid melt;
Your qualities are greater than can be encompassed,
In verses of a poem or counted by any critic.

Besides all this, an interesting point is that when 'Ali attempted to deal with the spiritual subject which are difficult to express in an eloquent style, his sayings reached perfect eloquence. 'Ali did not engage in open and wide topics like wine, the beloved, or in self-glorification. He never uttered these sayings to demonstrate his eloquency or his skill with words.

Actually, speech was, for him, a means of imparting his thoughts; not a target or an aim per se. He never intended to produce art or a literary master-piece. The most important thing is that his sayings are universal, free from the context of time or place. His audience is humanity of all ages and times; his sayings does not recognise any border, limit or period, rather all fields are limitations imposed on them.

The greatest aspect of the Qur'anic miracle from the point of view of its style is that although its wordings were related to the matters which were completely unknown and new to intellectuals of the early Islamic era, still it preserved its fluency and eloquence, and reached the degree of miracle. The Nahju 'l-

Balaghah was influenced in this respect by the Qur'an as in all of its other aspects. And, in reality, the Nahju 'l-Balaghah is an off-spring of the Qur'an.

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