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5. The Nahju 'l-Balaghah in the Present Age

There is a great difference between the world fourteen centuries ago and our age; it has changed many cultures, tastes, likes and dislikes. Somebody may think that the culture and taste of ancient times enjoyed and appreciated the sayings of Imam 'Ali, and that new thoughts and tastes would form different opinions about them.

But the fact is that the sayings of 'Ali (both in respect of their style and meaning) are not confined to a particular time or place. His sayings are universal. Along with the opinions of the past scholars, quoted above, we intend to write here what the famous scholars of our age have to say about the Imam's sayings.

Shaykh Muhammad 'Abduh, the famous Mufti of Egypt, is a person whom concidence and distance from home-land introduced to the Nahju 'l-Balaghah. This new chapter of knowledge gave rise to a great love in him, which made him write a commentary on the book and publicise it in the Arab Sunni world.

In the preface to his commentary, he declares that, "No one among the Arabs can be found to deny that the sayings of Imam 'Ali bin Abi Talib are, next to the Qur'an and the ahadith of the Messenger of Allah, the most noble, the most eloquent, the most abundant in knowledge, the most high in style, and the most comprehensive in profound thoughts."[1]

'Ali al-Jundi, writes in the preface to *'Ali bin Abi Talib - shi'ruhu wa hikamuhu* concerning the prose writing of 'Ali as follows: "In these sayings there is a special musical rhythm which affects the profound feelings. It is so excellently composed with regards to metre and harmony that it can be called the 'poetical prose'."

He then quotes from Qudamah bin Ja'far that, "Some are master in short sayings and others in long speeches. But 'Ali, apart from his other virtues, excels both in the short sayings and the long speeches."

Tahah Husayn, a literary celebrity and a famous writer of Egypt, in his book *'Ali wa Banuhu* relates the story of a man who, while fighting on the side of 'Ali in the battle of Jamal, hesitated and wondered to

himself that how could it be possible for persons like Talhah and Zubayr to be on the wrong side.

He approached ‘Ali and expressed his concern over the probability of such persons being on the wrong side. ‘Ali (upon whom be peace) answered, “You made a great mistake. Verily the truth and falsehood cannot be known by a person’s rank and status. Recognise the truth, you will be able to know its followers; and recognise the falsehood and you will be able to know its followers.”

The poor fellow, instead of regarding the truth and the falsehood as the standard for evaluating people’s rightfulness or otherwise, had assumed that the truth and the falsehood should be evaluated by the rank and status of the people. After writing this answer, Tahah Husayn says, “I have never seen or recognised such a glorious and eloquent answer apart from the revelation and sayings of Allah.”

Shakid Arsalan, known as Amiru ‘l–bayan (the master of speech), is one of the great Arab writers. At a reception held in Cairo in his honour, a man from the gathering went onto the podium and praised the chief guest in the following words: “Only two persons have emerged in the Islamic history who can rightly be called as Amiru ‘l–bayan. One of them is ‘Ali and the other is Shakid Arsalan.” On hearing this remark, Arsalan immediately went onto the podium and said, “How can you compare me with ‘Ali? I do not deserve to be even his shoe–lace.”[2]

Michael Na‘imah, a Lebanese Christian writer, writes in his preface to *al–Imam ‘Ali* (by George Jurdaq), “‘Ali was not only the pride of the battle–field, he was superior in every aspect – in sincerity of heart, purity of conscience, attractive speech, perfect humanity, spirit of belief, he was a great calm helper of the oppressed, always submitting to the reality in every place and moment; wherever you look, he is superior in all fields.”

I should now stop my pen from writing the opinions of others. But I wish to end this chapter by quoting a saying of ‘Ali as his sayings are like a mirror which reflects his personality more clearly.

One day a companion of Imam ‘Ali wanted to lecture but could not, then the Imam said, *“The tongue is a part of man. If man desists from thinking, the speech will not help him; and when he dilates his thoughts, the speech will not give him time. Verily, we are the masters of speech, in us have been planted its roots and over us dangle its branches.”* (Sermon No. 233)

In *al–Bayan wa at–Tabyin*, al–Jahiz narrates from ‘Abdullah bin al–Hasan bin ‘Ali that ‘Ali said, “We are distinguished from others by five virtues: eloquency, having beautiful cheeks, forgiveness and over–looking other’s mistakes, courage and braveness, and being loved by women.”[3] Now I shall write about the second distinctive characteristic of the sayings of Imam ‘Ali, that is, their multi–dimensionality.

1. Mu□ammad ‘Abduh, op. cit., p. 12.
2. This event was narrated to me by a contemporary Shi‘ite scholar of the Lebanon, Shaykh Muhammad Jawad Mughniyah in a reception held in his honour at Mashhad a few years before.
3. al–Jahiz, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 99.

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