

THE ISLAMIC POETRY OF SHUKRI ZAIN

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Introduction

The pseudonym Shukri Zain belongs to Haji Md. Zain Haji Serudin of Negara Brunei Darussalam, an oil-rich sultanate in Southeast Asia. He is a widely-travelled writer and has contributed profusely to Malay-Islamic literature. In this paper his contribution to Islamic poetry by using his native Malay language as the vehicle for his poetic expression will be discussed. The much-as-faithful-as-possible translation into English of excerpts of his poems together with the titles are provided by the contributor of this article.

We shall first briefly look at the background of the writer. He was born on 30th August 1936. He is one of Brunei Darussalam's more famous writers who has actively contributed to Islamic religious discourse, literature and culture. He began his early education in religious schools, and graduated from the world-renowned Islamic University of Al-Azhar in Egypt. As the discussion on his contribution to Islamic poetry shows, his poems extol religious virtues, and are full of praise of the Creator, and are also in support of Islamic teachings. He has written using different pseudonyms, including Md. Zain Brunei, Mara Siswa and Shukri Zain. It is the last pseudonym by which he is better known as evident from his anthology of poems published in 1983 and 1990. His poems have been published not only in Brunei Darussalam but also in her neighbouring countries – Singapore and Malaysia. His poems have been published by the Malay Language and Literature Division (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka) of both Brunei Darussalam and Malaysia. The Department of Religious Affairs, Brunei Darussalam has also published his poems underscoring the fact that Shukri Zain's poems are not only valuable to the Malay language, but they are also valuable additions to Islamic literature. He has also served in a high-ranking ministerial post as Minister of Religious Affairs of his country.

Concept of Islamic Literature

Let us first begin this paper with a concise description of the Islamic conception of literature of which poetry occupies an important membership. According to Mana Sikana, the concept

of Islamic literature refers to a genre of literature which portrays healthy living, piety, good deeds and values based on the Quran and Sunnah. Muhammad Badawi explicitly clarifies the attributes of Islamic literature: “the kind of literature endorsed and encouraged by Islam is of course that which furthers and upholds its values..... It must reflect the concept of monotheism, belief in the prophethood of Muhammad (SAAS), and the values of justice, truth and honesty as perceived in Islam. It must furthermore stand up to wrongdoing, oppression, and perversion and help the individual fight his base tendencies which are not in line with Islam’s values...”

Islamic Poetry

Islamic poetry, following the guidelines for Islamic literature, depicts the Islamic value system and promotes exemplary ethical values. It reinforces religious values. A Muslim poet creates poetry from the perspective of Islam – a religion of universal goodness and wellness. Islamic poetry is meant to be a form of wholesome literary entertainment as it reminds the reader of his Creator, his obligations towards the Creator and fellow human beings irrespective of whether they are Muslim or not; and of the deeds which will help to uplift him physically and spiritually.

Islamic poetry has a purpose – to instruct the reader in poetic fashion to become more aware of himself and his familial, societal and ummatic responsibilities. One whole surah in the Holy Quran is entitled ‘The Poets’ – *Surah 26 Ash-Shu’ara*. Poems composed from the Islamic angle are written for the pleasure of the Creator, the content conforms to the truth, upholds the universal values of Islam, does not include things which are irreverent, and Muslim poets consider it an Islamic duty to pen poems which possess the aforementioned attributes. Islam is not against all poetry writing, only against which is blasphemous, obscene and those which misguide the listeners or readers. Islam values clean and wholesome poetry. The evidence for this is found in *Surah 26* which emphasizes believing in Allah, performing good deeds, and remembering Him always. Muslim poets’ sources of inspiration are the Quran, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Companions of the Prophet, Muslim heroes, devout Muslims, and even Muslims, and even ordinary Muslims who are exemplary in some respect.

Poetry of Shukri Zain

The themes handled by Shukri Zain in his poetic works are varied – marital love; natural beauty; human tragedy, and Islamic themes such as prayer; purposeful living; getting close to Allah; not giving in to evil desires and patriotism. He treats the themes in a moderate and pleasantly readable manner. Shukri Zain's poetry provides an Islamic background even to poems which cannot be described as uniquely Islamic. In the poem on the physical beauty of the Taj Mahal, which was built by the great Mughal emperor Shah Jahan in India, the poet does not forget to include the Quranic inscriptions on the love monument which is an exemplary masterpiece of Islamic architecture:

Engravings of the holy verses
the monument is tested by time
a husband in profound love
built the Taj Mahal

In 'Pride', having described the picturesque beauty of the state of Kashmir in India which is dubbed as the Switzerland of Asia in three of the four stanzas, this Bruneian poet reserves the last to provide an Islamic colour to the poem:

Kashmir and her Islamicity
not willing to be humbled
are staunchly loyal to Allah.
May Muslims prosper forever.

In 'Starvation', the poet criticizes the opprobrious practice of destroying farm animals and food crops for the sake of getting good prices for them while Africa starves. In stark contrast to the practice of some countries in the West, the meat of animals, which had been slaughtered in Mina, Saudi Arabia in conjunction with the Muslim festival of sacrifice (*Hari Raya Korban*), are sent to starving people in various countries:

In Mina the sacrifices
animal are gathered and sent
to feed the starving population
in several continents

We shall now turn our attention to a few explicit Islamic poems. In 'Not for Nothing', Shukri Zain emphasizes that human beings have not been created without a purpose and indirectly and gently advises the readers to lead a purposeful life:

Certain things are forbidden with good reason
so as to benefit children of Adam
we were not created for nothing
Allah is bountiful and gracious.

In 'Work Ethics', this Malay poet exhorts the readers to give their best to whatever occupation they are involved in. This poem is incidentally the present researcher's favourite poem and I shall give here a translation of it in full:

It is not merely to work
not just to finish
give your best
in order to complete

There is no need to be urged
no need for someone to spy on us
we have been trained to fast
there is nothing to be hidden

Have faith in yourself
this is the characteristic of a Muslim
pretending is destructive
value faith and sincerity

Faith is not in prostration alone
it is existent in all types of work
Allah and His prophet are witnesses
seek the pleasure of Allah

In 'Lailatul Qadar', Shukri Zain writes about the very special night that Muslims all over the world look forward to with much joy in the fasting month of Ramadhan. A reading of this poem reinforces a Muslim's great love for this most auspicious night:

Lailatul Qadar is a night of rejoicing and blessing
the earth and sky meet in brightness
the night the Holy Quran was revealed
Jibril and the angel in procession bring greeting

.....
.....
The blessings of this night are unparalleled
Even a thousand other months are no match

The poetry of Shukri Zain is such that it is a form of *dakwah* whose gentle persuasion is his forte. In 'Good Times', he regrets the actions of those who do not appreciate their good fortune and are not grateful to their Creator. In 'Human Values', he invites the readers to

show their compassion wherever it is needed. They should love others just as they love themselves. They should wish good for others just as they would like to be recipients of goodness themselves.

Conclusion

A practitioner of Islamic literature is more likely to be read if the tone of his works is friendly, not overly moralistic, non-confrontational and the vocabulary and structure do not pose much difficulty to the reader's understanding. Shukri Zain's poems are not only Islamic in content, but also in their composition. His treatment lays the ground for an Islamic frame of mind. In the view of Ahmad Kamal Abdullah who is better known as Kemala, and a practitioner of Islamic poetry himself, Muslim poets have the responsibility to establish the truth by saying it beautifully as well. The present writer shares similar sentiments. Muslim poets should attempt to improve the spiritual quality of Muslims through the vehicle of beautiful language as can be seen in the works of Shukri Zain. Writing on literature in Brunei, Abdullah Hussain a distinguished Malaysian writer observes that Shukri Zain cannot be excluded from any discussion pertaining to the development of modern Malay literature in Brunei. He has not only enriched the Malay literary climate in his native Negara Brunei Darussalam, but also beyond in the realm of Malay Islamic poetry. The poet has sufficiently demonstrated the international character of the Malay language by handling eloquently various themes which are of global interest and significance.

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Biographical Details

Dr. Haja Mohideen bin Mohamed Ali is an Associate Professor at the Department of English Language and Literature, International Islamic University Malaysia. He has an M.Ed specializing in TEFL, and Ph. D, from the University of Wales, Cardiff, Britain. He also has a B.A and M.A in English literature. He has more than two decades of experience teaching English. His interests include Language Studies, Psycholinguistics, Contrastive Linguistics, and Islamic and Comparative Literature. He is the author of several books and has presented papers in various international conferences. He has contributed numerous educational articles to newspapers in Malaysia.

Abadilah Cintanya

Lambang sebuah cinta
tersergam bangunan indah
berlorek berkumai berhias rapi
Abadilah cintanya

Ukiran ayat-ayat suci
bangunan marmar diuji zaman
seorang suami dalam kerinduan
Taj Mahal buktinya

Kering sudah air matanya
makin bergelora ombak cintanya
mengenang suri yang telah pergi
terciptalah keajaiban dunia

Hanyalah lambing
kasih yang diabadikan
cintanya tak kunjung padam
bersama zaman dalam ristaan.

Taj Mahal
India
Mac 1983

Bangga

Bagai kapas terhampar ke bumi
sejuknya ke tulang sumsum
Kashmir kedinginan
berwuduk ait dididihkan

Tasiknya bunga teratai
perahu dagang berukir berkumpul
tongkang berhias hotel terapung
alam rezeki kelana kian ke mari

Menyapu awam banjaran gunung
liputan salji senantiasa
riak di tasik gunung terbayang
kembang berwarna hati tertawan

Kashmir dengan keislamannya
bangga patuh merendah diri
taat menjunjung kalimah Allah
bahagialah Muslimin kekal abadi.

Kashmir
India
Mac 1983

DAMAI DALAM SENTUHAN

Kelaparan

Afrika kekeringan
tulang-tulang berjungkatan
bergelimpangan bangkai dan mayat
mata kebuluran

Bencana di mana-mana
sengsara sentiasa melanda
kemiskinan tak pernah reda
merana lapar dahaga

Ternakan di Australia
dimusnahkan jaga pasaran
gandum di Barat
demi harga dicurahkan

Di Mina binatang korban
dikumpul dihantar
hidangan manusia lapar
di beberapa benua

Sampai bila kemanusiaan tegak
nafsu-nafsi masih bergerak
semboyan kosong belaka
bantu-membantu hanyalah mainan

Dunia batu ujian
kenyang lapar lumrah alam

Brunei
18 Januari 1985

DAMAI DALAM SENTUHAN

Bukan Percuma

Kita diciptakan Allah
melata berkaki segala rupa
rahsia hikmat tersembunyi
hanya Allah mengetahuinya

Ular-ular berbisa
meragut nyawa manusia
tanpa ular tikus membiak merosak
gandum tumbuhan manusia kelaparan

Kaki katak jadi hidangan
sistem ekologi tergendala
serangga nyamuk membiat
malaria dan lainnya berleluasa

Hukum haram punya rahsia
kelangsungan hidup zuriat Adam
bukan percuma makhluk diciptakan
Allah Maha Kaya dan sempurna

Brunei
21 Januari 1985

DAMAI DALAM SENTUHAN

Nilai Kerja

Bukan setakat dikerjakan
bukan hanya asal siap
buatlah sepenuh hati
bernilai disempurnakan

Tidak perlu dikerah
tidak usah diintip
kita diasuh berpuasa
tiada yang tersembunyi

Percayai dirimu
di sinilah peribadi seorang Muslim
pura-pura hanyalah kebinasaan
junjunglah iman dan kejujuran

Iman bukan hanya dalam sujud
terpancar dalam nilai segara kerja
Allah dan Rasul-Nya menjadi saksi
keredaan Allah juga yang dicari.

Brunei
15 Julai 1969

DAMAI DALAM SENTUHAN

Lailatulqadar

Hingga denyut fajar sudah terasa
di bumi para malaikat masih menjelma
cahaya fajar sinar malaikat bersulam-sulaman
bumi wangi malam kudus Rasul diutus

Malam gembira malam rahmat lailatulqadar
bumi dan langit bertemu dalam sinaran
malam wahyu malam al-Quran diturunkan
malaikat dan Jibril berarak membawa salam

Bumi dan zaman khusyuk bersyukur
tiada rahmat setungku langit pernah didapat
malam wahyu berkatnya tiada bandingan
walau seribu bulan lain pun tiada padan

Lailatulqadar malam mesra mendapat hati
di pelikuran bulan Ramadan ia dicari
malam berlalu hati dan lidah sentiasa mengucap
kepada Allah rindu bertambah meluap-luap.

September 1974