

“POET OF THE NILE” HAFIZ IBRAHIM’S POETRY: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY**Dr. Md. Mehedi Hasan**

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ABSTRACT

Hafiz Ibrahim (1872-1932) is one of the most famous Egyptian neo-classical poet. He is one of the founders of the neo-classical movement in Arabic poetry in the first half of the 20th century. His poetry was a mirror of his age and a record of Egypt's national struggle against colonialism, political corruption and social backwardness. He was one of several Egyptian poets that revived Arabic poetry during the latter half of the 19th century. While still using the classical Arabic system of meter and rhyme, these poets wrote to express new ideas and feelings unknown to the classical poets.

He was known as the “Poet of the Nile” (Shair al-Nil), and sometimes the “Poet of the People” (Shair al-Shab), as his writings were widely revered by ordinary Egyptians. He also reflected popular feelings and the sufferings of the poor classes. He is also noted for writing poems on political issues.

Keywords: *Hafiz Ibrahim, Arabic Poetry, Egyptian poetry.*

Hafiz Ibrahim (1872-1932) is one of the literary revival poets and a disciple of Al-Barudi School. He focused on poetic expression and purity of language. He also reflected popular feelings and the sufferings of the poor classes. His poetry was a mirror of his age and a record of Egypt's national struggle against colonialism, political corruption and social backwardness. He was excellent in reciting poems, and an outstanding public speaker.

His poetry was characterized by patriotism, charming rhythm and deep impact on recipients. It was neo-classical in style and expressed popular feelings and humor in terms that ordinary people could understand. His poetry teemed with innovative themes and covered all aspects of life. He called for Arab unity and expressed the disintegration and sufferings of the Arabs, dreaming of the restoration of their great past glory.

The main inspiration for Hafiz Ibrahim the poet was Mahmud Samy Al-Barudi (1839-1904). Like him, he joined the military academy, and like him too as an army officer, he became involved in a rebellion. “He also turned to the ancient Arabic heritage for his inspiration, endeavouring to model his style on the rhetoric and the pregnant phrase of the Abbasid poets. But, although there are times when it is even more rhetorical than Barudi's, on the whole Hafiz Ibrahim's poetry is much simpler, and that, in part, may be explained by the fact that his themes were more popular and his poems designed for declamation at large gatherings or for publication in newspapers and were, therefore, addressed to a wider audience”.

At an early stage, Ali Yusuf (1863-1913), pioneer journalist and founder of the influential Arabic daily newspaper ‘*al-Muayyad*’, called him the “*Poet of the Nile*” (shair al-Nil), an honorific title which he always kept and which was widely recognized, even outside Egypt. It is often remarked that he earned this nickname because the Nile runs through his poetry.

Like Al-Barudi and Ahmad Shawqi (1868-1932), Hafiz was greatly influenced by the poets of the classical period, and like them he was impressed by al-Marsafi's lectures, published in *al-Wasilah al-adabiyah*. Especially in his youth, Hafiz imitated classical examples; perhaps it was al-Barudi's example that inspired him to make an anthology of classical poetry, though it was never published. It is hardly surprising that he did not introduce great innovations in form and that he started his long poem about *Umar* with an erotic introduction. Hafiz would deviate from the monorhyme and the monometre of the qasida even less than Shawqi. “His ‘Hymn’ “*Nashid al-shubban al-Muslimin*”, written for the Muslim young men's association, was in the stanzaic form, as had been usual for hymns long before him, but in this case in that of the traditional (dubayt). The elegy on the death of Queen Victoria, “*Ritha al-malikah Victoria*” was a mukhammas, another old form. Hafiz traditionalism is also apparent in some wine poems, a genre which al-Barudi still cultivated, but Shawqi, for example, no longer”.

All this does not mean that Hafiz was not accessible to new ideas. On the contrary, he complained that poetry was too much committed to the old themes and, in a poem entitled ‘*Poetry*’ (al-Shir) exhorted it, with a great amount of rhetoric, to break the ties with tradition. Later, al-Mazini, who had attacked him severely in 1915, admitted that Hafiz was perhaps “the only poet of his days who did not entertain hatred for the new movement”. But even though this sweet-tempered man did approve of the innovations

of others, his own work shows little urge to “make it new”. He made few attempts to produce work in other genres than poetry. Unlike Shawqi, He did not write any plays, nor did he attempt to write a novel. He did produce a single prose work, *Layali Satih*, in the style of the ‘*maqamah*’. But whereas Shawqi had tried to write a kind of modern (historical) novel Hafiz chose a traditional Arabic form for his prose experiment.

He was a nationalist Arab poet. His poetry reflected the Arab identity. His poems addressed the common cultural factors of the Arab people. He owes his celebrity to his poem supporting the national cause of Egypt. His nationalism, like that of Shawqi, was barely politically defined: with Hafiz too it largely amounted to unease about the British occupation and the growing Western influence in Egypt. This is why he was equally interested in Turkey, though he was not of Turkish descent like Shawqi and did not have any special ties with the pro-Turkish Khedive. Turkey had his sympathy because as a leading Muslim nation, at least in the period before, and of course also during the First World War, it was regarded as a bulwark against the advancing Western powers. This may explain why Hafiz wrote a poem in praise of the Ottoman Sultan Abd al-Hamid II (1842-1918), who was generally considered a tyrant, on the occasion of the commemoration of his accession to the throne. When, after the revolution of 1909, Abdal-Hamid II was deposed, Hafiz lamented his fate, which in his case – as in Shawqi's – was seen as treason to the Arab cause. Like Shawqi, Hafiz thought the new Ottoman constitution so important that he dedicated a poem to it. His Muslim feeling turned into solidarity with the “East” in general, as may be seen from his reaction to the war between Japan and Russia. On the other hand, he glorified the ties with Syria (probably including the Lebanon) in a long poem entitled “*Suriyawa Misr*”, which may indicate an awareness of the ties with the other Arabs.

One of his best poetry is “*Haditha Dinshaway*” (Dinshaway incident) which brought him in limelight. The Dinshaway incident occurred in June, 1906 under Lord Cromer. A group of British soldiers, who were going pigeon hunting in Dinshaway, shot some domesticated pigeons and wounded a female villager. Egyptians angrily mobbed and attacked the surprised British soldiers who responded with open fire. One soldier, who managed to escape the chaos, died of heatstroke. A villager tried to assist the dying soldier but was mistaken as his murderer and beaten to death by other British Soldiers. They retaliated by sentencing four villagers to death, two to life imprisonment and three to one-year imprisonment and fifteen lashes, and the sentence was that the hanging and flogging should be carried out publicly in the village. Addressing the British government in his poem, Hafiz Ibrahim says:

“O you, who manage our affairs, have you forgotten our loyalty and affection?”

Reduce your armies, sleep soundly, search for your game in every corner of the land.

Should the ring doves be lacking on the hill, surely there are men enough for you to shoot.

We and the wood pigeons are one, for the rings have not yet parted from our necks.”

In a poem entitled ‘*Women’s Demonstration*’, he describes in mock heroic terms the unequal battle between the British troops and a procession of women peacefully demonstrating in protest against the arrest and exile of the nationalist leader Sad Zaghlul to Malta in 1919:

“The ladies came out in protest: I watched their rally.

They assumed their black garments as their banner,

Looking like stars shining bright in the midst of darkness.

They marched down the road, making for Sad’s house

Making clear their feelings, in a dignified procession,

When lo, an army approached, with galloping horses

And soldiers pointed their swords at the women’s necks.

Guns and rifles, swords and points, horses and horsemen formed a circle round them.

While roses and sweet basil were the women’s arms that day.

The two armies clashed for hours that turned the baby’s hair grey,

Then the women faltered, for women have not much stamina.

Defeated, they scattered in disarray towards their homes.

*So, let the proud army rejoice in its victory and gloat over their defeat.
 Could it be perhaps that among the women there were German soldiers
 wearing veils,
 A host led by Hindenberg in disguise,
 So the army feared their strength and were alarmed at their cunning?"*

He received wide positive reactions and support for his stance on pan-Arabism, and he was consequently invited by many cultural Arab clubs and organizations from various Arab countries to participate in their poetry festivals. There he called for the unity of the Arab people and the advancement of the Arab civilization. His visit to the American University of Beirut in 1929 and participation in the poetry festival organized by Arab nationalists there perhaps represent one of the best examples that portray the strong welcome by which the Arab world greeted Hafiz Ibrahim's poetry and ideas. Hafiz found similar reception on tours he made to Syria, Palestine, and Iraq.

Clarity is one of the main characteristics of Hafiz's poetry. His verse is free from vagueness and philosophical overtones. He seldom employs rare or foreign expressions. Since his task was to address the masses, his message was clear and easily understood by all. Another characteristic is a pre-occupation with sound effects. Hafiz chose words for their musical appeal, sonority and resonance, e.g. the opening lines of Muhammad Abduh's elegy. As he recited his poem himself, Hafiz was especially conscious of rhythm. His elegies are composed in beautiful metres with several elongated feet to suit the words of sorrow and dignity.

In an solitary poem on Pharaonic Egypt, *Misr tatha dathan Nafsiha* (Egypt Talks About Herself) Hafiz scans the historic splendor of his ancient land. Consider these lines:

*"...Have ye not stood.
 Beneath the Greater Pyramid and seen
 What I have laboured? Have ye not
 beheld Those magic carvings which
 defeat the art Of any rival craftsman?
 Centuries
 Have not assailed their pigments, though the
 day Itself turns colour. Do ye not understand
 Those mysteries of hidden lore, which I
 Hold secret in my cloak? My glory stands
 Unrivalled, rooted in eternity."*

His poetry also reflected a Muslim identity, wherein he supported the idea of a Muslim Caliphate and society that would unite the whole of the Islamic peoples. Ibrahim advocated this idea in his poetry and saw the "Ottoman Nation" as a natural leader of it.

He defended the Arabic language when he felt that it was threatened by the British educational policy. In the 20th century, there were some of Arab poets asked for a new evolution in education and writing system. They wanted to change the writing format from Arabic Fusha to Arabic Amiya (Colloquial Arabic). Hafiz wrote a poem titled "*Al- lughah al-Arabiyyah tana Hazzaha*" (The Arabic language mourn its luck) to object others who did dispute the credibility of Arabic Fusha. This poem is one of the most famous, popular and widely read of his works. It found great popularity in all parts of the Arabic speaking world. In this self-elegy of Arabic language Hafiz wrote:

*"I began to have doubts, so I called upon my people and dedicated my life (to the cause of reward from God)
 They accused me of being barren when I was still young. Would that I were barren, for then my enemies'
 accusation would not make me apprehensive.
 (Indeed) I gave birth, but when I did not find worthy suitors for my brides I buried my daughters alive.
 I was capable of handling God's Book (i.e., the Quran): words and concepts- and I wasn't too narrow to handle
 verses and sermons.
 (That being the case,) how would I today be too incapable of describing a device and arranging names for
 inventions?
 I am the sea, in whose guts the pearls are hidden. Have they asked the divers about my shells?
 Woe unto you! I perish, and so do my beauties- and though the cure is precious- it is those from among you
 who are doing the harm.
 Do not relegate me to (the passage of) time, for I fear for you when my time comes.
 I see men of the West: mighty and invulnerable. Many a people gained might by the glory of the language!"*

His bulk of poetry consists of elegies on fallen Egyptian heroes. He wrote some of the best-known of the elegies produced on the death of public figures such as Muhammad 'Abduh, Mustafa Kamil and Sa'd Zaghlul. It is in his elegies that he reached heights not attained by any other poet in modern times. He mourned Mustafa Kamil in three poems, each being a picture of a tormented soul. Hafiz was a dear friend of the leader and Mustafa Kamil gave a glowing appraisal of his first volume in *Liwa*.

"Oh grave! This guest you welcome

Gave hopes to a whole nation.

*So praise God, and receive
him, Respectful, in
prostration.*

*Oh martyr of high purpose,
That Voice of yours is
sounding Unchanged, today
just as it Was
yesterday resounding.*

Its shouts out saying "This is a building I erected:

Consign not to destruction

This same thing I erected.

*It orders us: In God's name,
Be not ye disunited: Behave like men, and make
not Your enemies delighted.*

*Allow us one day's
weeping! Then you will
find us ready,*

*At dawn, as you would have us,
Like mountains, firm and
steady.*

*Oh river Nile! If you should Not
flow, after his going,*

*Blood-red I swear you would
not, Oh Nile be truly flowing."*

In his famous poem "The Girls' School in Port Said," recited upon his visit to the school on May 29, 1910, Hafiz paid homage to the mother's crucial role in raising the nation's future generation:

*The mother is a school; if you prepare her,
you prepare a nation with a
strong foundation.*

*The mother is a garden; if nurtured by the rain, it blossoms, and how
splendid is its bloom!*

*The mother is the teacher of all teachers; her outstanding work can be
seen in the farthest corners of the world.*

M. M. Badawi wrote, criticizing him and his poetry: "Hafiz was not a profound thinker, and his sentiments and reflections were little more than what the average Egyptian of the time felt and thought on current issues. Critics are agreed that his imaginative power was not of the highest and that he dealt with a narrow range of subjects. His poems are free from any deep philosophical or moral reflections and his more subjective pieces are limited to complaints. Much of the effect he had upon his contemporaries—which according to enthusiastic reporters was at times overwhelming—was due to the skillful way he intoned and declaimed his verse at public gatherings. In this respect he was a master of so-called 'platform poetry'."

However, He must be counted among the representatives of the innovating Egyptian poetical school, whose leader was Sami al-Barudi and who followed their own temperaments and nature, aiming to detach themselves from tradition. But he set himself apart from other spokesmen of the new generation by his more spontaneous adherence to the cause of the people and the cause of the Arab community in general, whose legitimate emotions and ambitions he succeeded in reproducing. In fact, the pieces in his *Diwan* reveal a mass of details and direct observations which on the one hand

throw light on several aspects of Egyptian political and social life during the first decades of this century, and on the other allow us to glimpse the frequently polemical standpoint of the poet. Particularly in those verses which are immediately recognized as political, he demonstrates his perfect grasp of the reality of the situation, that is, that the three authorities struggling for the good opinion of the public (the British, the Sultan, and the Khedive) must be flattered and that he must above all smother his anger and despair and conceal his thoughts. Suffering, complaints, anxiety and melancholy are the basis for the best verses of Hafiz Ibrahim, whose reserved for such themes his most delicate choice of images and his most effective vocabulary, in a structure that is far from ignoring the classical tradition completely.

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