



Exploring the Themes in the Poetry of Aḥmad Shawqī: A Brief Study

Imran Hossain Talukdar

Research Scholar, Department of Arabic, Cotton University, Guwahati, Assam, India

Dr. Farid Uddin Ahmed

Assistant Professor, Department of Arabic, Cotton University, Guwahati, Assam, India

Abstract:

In this paper an attempt has been made to highlight the literary position of Aḥmad Shawqī and to explore various poetic themes depicted in his poetry. He was a neo-classical poet in modern Arabic literature. His poetry is characterized by a remarkable elegance and aesthetic beauty. Drawing on classical Arabic literary traditions, he skilfully wove intricate verses, employing sophisticated language and intricate rhyme schemes. His ability to craft poetry with unparalleled grace contributed to the enduring appeal of his work. He composed poetry in different themes, such as, love and romance, nationalism, patriotism, humanism, post-colonialism and diverse social issues as well. Apart from these, he composed panegyric poetry on Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). In fact, his poetry serves as a bridge between the past and the present, reflecting a profound reverence for history and culture. He often drew inspiration from the rich heritage of Arab civilization, incorporating historical references and cultural symbols into his verses. In doing so, he contributed to a broader cultural revival, encouraging a renewed appreciation for the Arab world's intellectual and artistic legacy.

Keywords: Aḥmad Shawqī, Neo-classicism, Arabic poetry, Egypt, Thematic aspect.

Introduction:

Aḥmad Shawqī (1868-1932) was an outstanding Egyptian poet, playwright, and diplomat who played a significant role in revitalizing Arabic poetry during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He was born into a family of courtiers, and grew up in the vicinity of the Khedive's palace. In his early years Egypt was undergoing one of its most dynamic periods under the Khedive Ismail, and the modern school system was becoming increasingly predominant. Shawqī was educated in the school of Cairo and graduated from the school of law, he was sent by the court to study France. Soon after his return to Egypt he became the khedive's court poet (shā'ir al-amîr).¹ He was a neo-classical poet who reproduces in a highly creative manner many of the major highly figures of classical Arabic poetry like Ibn Zaydūn of

Muslim Spain. Abu Tammām, al-Buḥturī, al-Mutanabbī and Abu al-‘Ala’ al-Ma‘arri were the other important sources of inspiration to him from the classical tradition. While he visited France he translated Lamartine’s *Le lac* into Arabic and produced his own Arabic version of La Fontaine’s *Fables*. After World War I, Shawqī ardently embraced in his verse themes celebrating the rise of Egypt as a new and independent nation-state.² He was acclaimed the famous title ‘‘Amīr al-Shu‘arā’ (Prince of Poet) in 1927 by his contemporaries in recognition of his considerable contributions to the literary field. The ceremony was held in Cairo where the most illustrious Arab poets, including his fellow neo-classical Egyptian poet Hafiz Ibrahim also attended.³

Methodology:

This study has been prepared on the basis of descriptive and analytical manner. A thorough investigation of the topic is done by collecting the materials from primary and secondary sources. The primary data has been taken from the diwan (anthology) of the poet ‘‘al-Shawqīyyāt’’. As far as the secondary data are concerned, many books, journals, periodicals etc. are consulted which are written on various aspects of the poetry of Aḥmad Shawqī.

Description:

Aḥmad shawqī’s work can be categorized into three main phases during his career. The first coincides with the period during which he occupied a position at the court of Khedive, royal patronage governed his life for almost half a century. First of all Khedive Tawfiq appointed him at the palace secretariat and later sent him to study Law and literature at the University of Montpellier where he spent six years and could travel widely in Europe acquiring all aspects of its culture. Referring to this period he says: ‘‘I found from the first day the light that should illuminate my path’’.⁴ His remarkable poetic talent was recognized soon after he came back to the Egyptian court in 1891 and he became effectively a poet laureate of Khedive Abbas II, gaining an envious position of authority. This period consists of eulogies to the Khedive: praising him or supporting his policy.⁵

The second comprised the period of Shawqī exile in Spain. He was exiled on account of his office at the court and loyalty to Khedive Abbas II as well as his panegyric poetry in support of the Ottoman caliphate and criticism of British policy in Egypt. During this period his feeling of nostalgia and sense of alienation directed his poetic talent to patriotic poems on Egypt as the Arab world. He wrote his reputed Andalusian nostalgic poems expressing his deep longing for him. When he returned from exile, he was warmly welcomed by the masses of people in Alexandria and later in Cairo. He became closer to popular feelings and more concerned as well as involved in the causes and problems of the people. He thus truly deserved to be known as the ‘‘Poet of Arabism and Islam’’.

The third stage occurred after his return from exile: during that period he became preoccupied with the glorious history of ancient Egypt and Islam. This was the period during which he composed his religious

or Sufi poems, in praise of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). In fact this period from 1919 to 1932 was highly productive for him.

The main output of Ahmad Shawqi was his diwan al-Shawqīyyāt, consist of four volumes, which depicts many themes and objectives. The first volume of it contains social and political poetry and also includes poems on education, women in modern Egypt, and Islamic and historical themes. The second volume contains poetry of descriptive and amatory prelude. The third volume consists of elegies composed upon the deaths of major public figures such as Sa'd Zaghul, Mustafa Kamil, Qasim Amin and Hafiz Ibrahim. The fourth volume focuses on various socio-political and post-colonial themes. The bulk of his verses are related with social poetry and include eulogies, elegies, description and occasional poetry. He also composed verse plays numbering six, of which the more famous are: 'Maşra' Kilubaṭra' (The fall of Cleopatra) and 'Majnūn Layla'. In fact he was a distinguished poet whose work not only showcased linguistic elegance but also bore the imprints of profound nationalism and a commitment to cultural revitalization. His poetry continues to resonate with readers due to its rich exploration of various themes. A few themes have been discussed below:

Nationalism and Patriotism:

One of the central themes in Shawqi's poetry is his unwavering nationalism and deep sense of patriotism. Living during a period marked by political upheavals and challenges to Arab identity, Shawqi used his verses to articulate a fervent love for his homeland, Egypt, and a broader commitment to the Arab cause. His poems often served as a rallying cry for unity and resistance against external pressures. He had a great love and respect for his homeland Egypt since his blood runs in its soil. Patriotism was his deep concern in his poetry. He gets healing while he thinks of his beloved motherland. He felt the value of his mother land and that is why he was always nostalgic and to love assisting for her cause. He says in 1904 about his country as follows:

'Uḥibbuka mişra min 'aa'māq qalbî
wa ḥubbukî fî şamîm qalbî nāmî
Sayazmau'nî bika al-tāriḫ yawman
idha ḍahara al-kiram 'ala al-liām'.⁶

(I love you oh Egypt from the core of my heart;
And in my deep heart your love is growing.
One day the history will get together me with you;
While it appears for the noble people on the blame.)

In these verses Ahmad Shawqi preferred his homeland to his religion and turns his face to the native land before the Kaaba when he meets his Lord. While he was in exile at that time he says about his own country in the following verses:

Waṭani law shughiltu bi'l-khuld 'anhu
nāza'atanî 'ilaihî fî'l-khuld nafsî.⁷

(Oh my homeland, if I was distracted from it forever,

I would ever struggle myself for it.)

That is, if he was distracted from the homeland by the eternity of paradise and its abode, his soul would remain rushing to the homeland and tending to it. His philosophy of Arab nationalism is farsighted and wide spread.

Poetry of Satire (shi'r al-hijā):

Aḥmad Shawqī was against the colonial powers. Napoleon Bonaparte's invaded Egypt in 1798 marked the beginning of the progressive subjection by the major European colonial powers of much of the Arab lands. With its occupation of Egypt in 1882, colonialist Britain entered into a relationship of power and powerlessness. The poet was even exiled to Spain for six years by those power. Describing the occupation of Napoleon and his team to seize the vast country of Egypt and paved the way to the colonialism in Egypt he says:

“Ya Faransa nilti ‘asbāb al-samā;

wa tamallakti maqālid al-jiwā

Ghuliba al-nasaru ‘alā daulatihi;

wa tanahḥa laki an ‘arshi al-hawa.⁸”

(Oh France! You have got all the means of highness;

And you have seized the powers over a vast area of land.

The Eagle has overpowered in its country;

Whereas you have been set aside from the throne.)

He responds to Lord Cromer's Farewell speech which he delivered at the Khedival opera House in Cairo on the evening of May 4, 1907 at the end of his tenure as Consul General in Egypt (1883-1907). His Qaṣīdah “A Farewell to Lord Cromer” represents a literary-rhetorical response to the colonialism and he satirises against the autocratic Lord Cromer. He says in the following verses:

Ayyāmukum am ‘ahdu Ismā‘ilā?

am anta fir‘a wunu yasūsu n-nīlā?⁹

(Your own days or the age of Ismā‘il?

Or are you a Pharaoh ruling the Nile?

The first line sets the tone for the whole Qaṣīdah. It reflects a contrast between Isma‘il and Cromer. Significantly, Cromer is identified with Pharaoh who stands for despotism, injustice and oppression to his people. Here, in the abovementioned verse it portrays that Cromer was ruled like Pharaoh of Egypt.

Love and Romance:

Shawqī's poetry explored themes of love and romance. His verses frequently depicted the beauty of nature, the intoxication of love, and the nuances of human emotions. Through these themes, Shawqī demonstrated a multifaceted approach to poetry, capturing both the personal and the collective experiences of his readers. He composed ghazal (love poetry) during his visit to Paris capital of France. He says that he was fallen in love with a beautiful girl. Since she was pretty many people tried to love

her and they tried to deceive her by their praising. She had no tendency towards them. As their love was not pure and chaste, but in regards to him, he was real lover of his beloved who praised her truly. Then he asked himself: Did my beloved forget my name? In a poem entitled “‘Khadaūha bi-qaulihim ḥasnāu” where he expresses his deep love with her as he says in the following verses:

‘Khadaūha bi-qaulihim ḥasnāu
 wa al-ghawānī yaghurruhunna al-thanāu
 A’tarahā tanāsāt ismīa;
 kathurat fī gharāmihā al-a’smāu’¹⁰
 (Deceived her by saying that she is beautiful;
 And beautiful women are often tempted by the praise.
 Is she my name pretending to forget when?
 Many lovers fall in love one so loved?)

He says more,

“In ra’tni tamīlu a’nni kaa’n lam
 taku bainī wa bainihā ’ashyāu.
 Nazratun fa-ibtisāmatun fa-salāmun;
 fa-kalāmun fa-mau’īdun fa-liqāu.”¹¹
 (If she looks me distracts me away from her as if
 There was nothing exist between her and me.
 Looking, then smiling and also saluting her;
 And then speaking, promises and then meetings with her.)

Here, the poet says that when his beloved saw him she was pretending to forget the relation since she became angry with him due to failing their meeting with each other for a long period. Afterwards Shawqi likes to explain that the relation of love between each other exists since a long time when they saw each other, meets with smiling, and saluting her when he meets her in appointed time.

He says on **beauty of Nature** (waṣf al-ṭabīa) while he was on his tour to Istanbul after returning from Europe. He describes the nature of that moment as follows:

“Tilka al-ṭabī’a qif binā yā sārī
 ḥatta ’urīka badī’a ṣunī al-bārī
 Al-’arḍu ḥaulaka wa’l-samāu ihtazzatā
 li-rawa’i al-āyāt wa’l-āthāri.”¹²
 (Stop, let your eyes now enjoy the beauty of Nature:
 You’re seeing the marvellous creating of the Creator.
 Earth and sky are shaking with a joy that is splendid...
 Under wonderful miracles bless with delightfully.)

Humanism and Social Commentary:

Shawqī's poetry exhibited a humanistic dimension. He delved into societal issues, addressing the challenges faced by individuals and communities. His verses offered social commentary on topics such as justice, morality, and the human condition, reflecting a concern for the well-being of society. He showed great importance in education and appealed his countrymen to pay the due to those who imparts knowledge, he says:

“Qum li'l-mua'llim waffihu al-tabjīla
 kāda al-mua'llim a'n yakūn rasūlā
 Subhānaka allahumma khair mua'llim
 ‘allamta bi'l-qalam al-qurun al-’ūla.”¹³
 (Stand for the teacher, his rank be honouring
 For a teacher is almost a prophet I'm saying.
 Glory to you, Oh God, the best teacher of men
 You taught the earliest ages how to use the pen.)

Ahmad Shawqī was a great supporter to develop the position of women. He recited a poem in 1924 to a large gathering of Egyptian women at the Azbakeya Park Theatre hall and he named the title of his diwan (anthology) as “Miṣr tujaddidu majdahā bi-nisāi'hā al-mutajaddidāt” (Egypt can revive its glory with its innovative women) where he says:

“Qum ḥayyî hadhi al-nayyîrāt
 ḥayyî al-ḥasān al-khairāt.
 Hadhā rasūl Allah lam
 yunqis ḥuquqa al-mu'mināt
 Al-I'lm kāna sharia
 li-nisāi'hi al-mutafaqqihāt.”¹⁴
 (Stand, do alive these luminaries,
 Animate these pretty and the good ones
 This is the Messenger of Allah who did not
 Diminish the rights of believing women
 Knowledge was an Islamic law
 For the cultured women.)

Poetry of Eulogy (al-sh'iru al-madīh):

Ahmad Shawqī has written many poems in praise of Khedive Tawfiq, the king Abdul Hamid, and in the praise of the prophet Muhammad, PBUH. The most famous are: al-Hamziyya al-Nabawiyya and al-Burda (The prophet's Mantle), which is the best one composed after that of its famous originator al-Bu'siri. Shawqī had a great respect and reverence to the prophet of Islam who has enlightened the world with the true guidance. He says in the praise of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), in his poem al-Hamziyya al-Nabawiyya as follows:

“Wulida al-huda fa’l-kāyenāt dhiyau
 wa fāmu al-zamān tabassamu wa thanāu
 Al-ruḥu wa’l-malā’u al-malā’ik ḥaulahu
 li al-dīn wa’l-duniya bihi busharāu.”¹⁵

(The right guidance was born, so the universe became bright,
 And the smile in the face of the time and praise continued from the mouth.
 The Holy Spirit and the angels around him
 Started giving the good news for the religion and the world through him.)

Poetry of Elegy (al-shi‘r al-rithā):

Ahmad Shawqī composed many poems on elegy. He wrote poems in lamentation of his grandmother, his mother and his father. Then he lamented many writers like Ismail Sabri, Qasim Amin, Mustafa Lutfi al-Manfaluti and Hafiz Ibrahim as well as he wrote many poems in lamentation of nationalist leaders like Mustafa Kamil, Sa’d Zaghlul and Sultan Hossain. Ahmad Shawqī wrote a poem in the lamentation of Hafiz Ibrahim and the beginning of that poetry is:

“Qad kuntu ’ūthiru ’an taqūla rithāi
 ya munṣif al-mauta min al ’ahyā’i.”¹⁶
 (I would have preferred you to say my elegy,
 O the equitable of the dead from the living.)

When Mustafa Kamil, one of the great national leaders of Egypt, passed away in 1908 Shawqī became very passionate. He felt great loss for the nation so he mourned for him. After thirteen days of his demise, he composed a poem which was considered the greatest elegy in the history of Arabic literature. This poem had a great effect on the minds of the people and renewed the sorrows of the people. It composed a piece of immortal patriotic poetry and he says as follows:

“Al-mashriqān ‘alaik yantaḥibān
 qāsīhimā fi ma’tam wa al-dānī
 Ya khādima al-Islam ’ajr mujāhid
 fi Allah min khuld wa min ridhwān.”¹⁷
 (Those who are bright over you mourn
 Their distant ones at the funeral of their parents,
 O the servant of Islam, the reward of a mujahid
 In the cause of Allah is eternal paradise and His pleasure.)

Conclusion:

In fine, the poetry of Ahmad Shawqī remains a testament to the enduring power of language and its ability to encapsulate the complexities of the human experience. Through themes of elegance, nationalism, love, history, and humanism, Shawqī's verses continue to resonate with readers, inviting them to explore the rich tapestry of Arab culture and identity. In weaving together these themes, Ahmad

Shawqī not only revitalized Arabic poetry but also left a lasting legacy that transcends time and resonates with generations of poetry enthusiasts.

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