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Islamic Spirit as Revived in Al Mahmud's Poetry

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Islamic Spirit as Revived in Al Mahmud's Poetry

Salma Begum^α & Nusrat Jahan^ο

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I. INTRODUCTION

Al Mahmud, a major poet of Bengali literature, upholds Islamic spirit in many of his poetry. He uses Islamic consciousness and Muslim history to resist imperialism, to prevent injustice or to alleviate evil from the world. Even in his love poems, the use of words taken from the daily life of Muslim people, their culture and belief is clearly evident. His choice of words from Muslim culture and the language really spoken by common people gives his poetry a unique characteristic as Muhammad Motiur Rahman says,

for poetic diction, Al Mahmud does not explore dictionary laboriously, nor does he seek image to show off scholarly knowledge, rather he presents a colourful picture of his poetic imagination using easy and simple words exclusively familiar, common in rural Muslim society (MotiurRahman, Al Mahmud and His Own Poetic World, Prekkhon, p 64).

In regard to poetic diction, Al Mahmud's idea is very near to that of William Wordsworth as the latter states in his A Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, that for the language of poetry he has used the words really spoken by men (Wordsworth, a Preface to Lyrical Ballads, p 27). Al Mahmud, a Muslim poet living in a Muslim society, easily and consciously uses words of Muslim culture that give his poetry a unique taste of novelty and make him a peace loving poet. He says, '.....I've embraced Islam as my religion and peace of this world

and the world hereafter' (Al Mahmud, a long way for poetry, p 33 cited by Motiur Rahman in Prekkhon p 70).

Islam is a religion of peace '...this day have I perfected your religion for you, completed my favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion' (Al Quran, sura al Mai'dah 5:3). For establishing peace it wants abolition of all evil power and institutions working against peace in the society as well as in the world.

Again Islam affirms equity and parity among all human beings indiscriminating nation, religion, caste, sex, powerful, powerless, rich, poor in the world. Here in Islam, only Allah, who is the Creator and the Sustainer of the universe, is the Greatest and only Allah deserves greatness (Al Qur'an, sura Al Fatiha, 1: 1) and nothing is equal to Him (Al Qur'an, sura Ikhlas, 112: 4). Allah is the only one who has the Supreme power and the Supreme authority over all as it is declared in the Quran,

Glorified be He
In whose hands
Is dominion;
And He over all things
Has power (Al Qur'an, sura al Mulk, 67: 1).

So, according to Islam, only Allah deserves the greatness and honour from all His creation. He is the King of all Kings (Al Qur'an At Ti-n, 95:8) and all human beings are his slaves (Al Qur'an, 1:5). Thus Islam denies discrimination between man and man and their prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) announces this in his farewell speech delivered in the field of Arafa. In his speech, after praising and thanking Allah, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said that all people are servants of Allah, that they all descended from the same mother and father, all people are equal, regardless of their race, color, language and class; the measure of superiority is their piety before Allah. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) generally mentioned about the human rights. He emphasized the security of life, property and chastity. He ordered that people should be careful about human rights, avoid cruelty and haram (religiously forbidden) food and protect trusts; he threw light on the mutual rights, obligations and duties of the husband and wife. The Prophet also stated that all Muslims are brothers and sisters, and he emphasized the importance of unity and cooperation (Farewell Sermon of Muhammad, pbuh). This was a revolutionary declaration that equalizes all human being raising them to the level of man to show their obedience only to Allah. This equity and parity are embodied in the system of their performing prayer when all Muslims regardless the rich

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and the poor, the ruler and the ruled, white and black stand in the same line to prostrate before the Almighty Allah.

Jihad is another important factor in Islam, which is mostly misinterpreted too. According to Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, the meaning of Jihad is 'holy war' and 'struggle for achieving something' (A.S. Hornby, Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary). According to Islam, jihad means struggle against evil. Jihad is an Arabic word from the root Jee Ha Da. It literally means to struggle or strive.

Jihad is struggling or striving in the way or sake of Allah. Jihad takes a very important status in the doctrine of Islam and is one of the basic duties for every Muslim. Though, it has nothing whatsoever to do with the term Holy War. Such a term, or its equivalent doesn't exist in the Islamic doctrine. The Christian Crusaders in the mid-ages invented this ideology of Holy War. There is nothing "Holy" about wars. Wars only involve killings and disasters!

Jihad has many forms,

- Jihad of the heart/soul (jihad bin nafs/qalb)
- Jihad by the tongue (jihad bil lisan)
- Jihad by the pen/knowledge (jihad bil qalam/ilm)
- Jihad by the hand (jihad bil yad)
- Jihad by the sword (jihad bis saif)

Sometimes it is necessary to undertake Jihad by the sword. This would include usage of arsenals and engaging in a combat. This could be simply a bunch of freedom fighters or an organized campaign of army. Jihad by the sword is use of arms to engage into a combat. It is not misuse of arms to create violence. There are only two situations where Jihad by the sword is allowed to be undertaken.

a) *For Self-Defence*

When someone attacks you or when your nation has been attacked. Engaging into combat due to self defence.

b) *Fighting against Evil and Unjust*

It is also a sin if a Muslim sees unjust been done, capable of stopping it, yet not doing anything about it. This can include war on drug, war on child labour as well as war on terror! The American administration today seems to be launching a global war on terror, but are they the first to launch the war on terror? The Muslims already announced the war on terror fourteen centuries ago, under the name of Jihad bis saif! There are many rules and limitations when engaging in combat under the title of Jihad. For example, civilians are not to be harmed; trees are not to be cut down; asylum should be granted to surrendering enemy soldiers; etc.'(justislam, internet)

Al Mahmud adopts the last form of jihad in his poetry as a means to uproot evil and to set the suppressed humanity free.

Al Mahmud speaks for justice and humanity with the assurance of all basic human rights for all regardless man, woman, rich, poor, black, white in the world. Wherever these rights are at a stake, his voice is high against the oppressor. In this regard, he is highly inspired by the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)'s farewell sermon where he clearly pronounces the equality of all men and discards all discrimination between man and man. The Prophet declares,

'from today all discrimination between man and man is abolished. There is no superiority of Arabs over non-Arabs, white over black, rich over poor; he who is the most loyal to Allah, is the best in the eyes of Allah'(Prophet Muhammad, the Farewell Sermon). Undoubtedly, this exalts any human- loving person.

Prayer is another feature of Islam. Al Mahmud also revives the spirit of prayer in his poems showing how prayer, instead of being a means of getting small things, can be a source of strength to fight against evil, and to get the help of Allah whose help, according to Islam, is the best help to accomplice any work. So he avails prayer to alleviate evils of suppression and repression from the world. Thus he uses prayer for a great goal purposive of all good. Emerson also echoes the same purpose of prayer, '.....prayer that craves a particular commodity,-anything less than all good,-is vicious' (Emerson, self-reliance, Essays of Emerson edited by Tilak , p 106).

Al Mahmud applies Islamic idea of humanity, prayer, liberty, jihad or struggle against evil in his poetry. He presents these things of Islam with a view to freeing humanity from the hands of tyrants everywhere in the world. Application of these terms through common words of everyday use is not only wonderful but daring too.

Here in this article I have explored Al Mahmud's poems like 'Bakhtier's horse', 'whose flag it is on the conscienceless earth', 'Prayer at Qadre Night', 'Sound of Triumph', and 'The Soul of a Singing Poet'. In these poems Al Mahmud abundantly uses words of Islamic culture and brings out the spirit of jihad, prayer, freedom of human kind from slavery, absolute loyalty to the Almighty and revolt against all tyranny -----everything to set humanity free and to sing the victory of mankind.

II. DISCUSSION

In the poem Bakhtier's Horse, Al Mahmud revives the spirit of 'jihad' to resist suppression, repression, and injustice to set humanity free. Here he adopts the final form of jihad as the last means when all other means fail to resist injustice of evil power. Here in this poem, he recalls from the history of Bangla, the incident of a great Mujahid (fighter for justice) Bakhtier Khilji who attacked the palace of Lakkhan Sen who was a cruel dictator at that time. Lakkhan Sen tortured lower class people and Muslims of his state. Getting this

news, Bakhtier Khilji, from Indian territory, came at a storm-speed (only 17 soldiers could follow him) and entered the palace at midday when Lakkhan Sen was taking lunch and at this news he escaped without making any resistance. In this way, Bakhtier Khilji won Bangla without any bloodshed and he established a welfare state in Bangla.

.....he was not bloodthirsty. He would not like murder and torture. He used to satisfy the chiefs of internal administration and military army by establishing a kind of feudal system in the country (Sir Jadunath Sarker, History of Bengal vol. ii, Muslim Period, p 9 cited in Muslim History of Bengal, Abbas Ali Khan, p 25).

After the conquer of Bengal, Muhammad Bakhtier established internal laws and order. Though he set up mosques and Madrasas in different places of the country, he followed a generous policy towards the non-Muslims (Abbas Ali Khan, Muslim History of Bengal, p. 25).

Al Mahmud adopts the spirit of jihad against the tyrant suppressor. Establishment of peace and order in Bangla by Bakhtier became possible by the extreme form of jihad that took place to set people free and not to enslave them under another king. Al Mahmud, obviously, is inspired by the following saying of Al Qur'an---

And fight them on
Until there is no more
Tumult and oppression,
And there prevail
Justice and faith in Allah; (Al Qur'an, sura al Bakarah, 2: 193).

According to Al Qur'an, a faithful Muslim's aim of life is to uproot from the earth all lordship and worship of man and to establish the lordship of Allah only. This is the aim of jihad (Delwar Hossain Saydee, An Appraised Nation Bound to Worst Destination, p, 493). Jihad of extreme stage aims at setting the suppressed and oppressed humanity free from all man-made lordship, authority, sovereignty, suppression, oppression and deprivation. Al Qur'an says---

And why should you not
Fight in the cause of Allah
And for those who, being weak,
Are ill-treated (and oppressed)?—
Men, women, and children,
Whose cry is: "Our Lord!
Rescue us from this town,
Whose people are oppressors;
And raise for us from You
One who will help!" (Al Qur'an, sura Nisa, 4:75).

This Qur'anic inspiration is evident in lines of this poem. Here Bakhtier fights for this very cause. In this poem a Muslim mother is telling story of Bakhtier to her boy while sleeping. Being greatly inspired by the

story, the boy sleeps and in his dream he shouts 'jihad, jihad' that means he is inspired greatly by the chivalry of the soldier and wants to fight against all tyrants of the world. A few lines from the poem,

My heart often cries for fighting
Blood seems to be the only solution, gunpowder the
supreme pleasure;
And then I wake up uttering jihad, jihad in dreams.

.....
.....
Curious by the lullaby he puts his ear on the pillow to
hear
The beeps of his heart in the chest of the pillow.
It seems to him he is hearing the horse race. He asks,
Mom, who is Bakhtier?
Mother moves the fan and smiles,
He is Allah's soldier, the king of the destitute.
Wherever the believers fear to call azan,
And man worships man,
He appears there. The rider of the white horse of the
Khiljis.
Look, the tyrant is escaping through the back door
Look. (Al Mahmud in English, translated by Ali Azgor,
p 46)

Al Mahmud's aspiration for freeing humanity obviously gets strength from Islamic ideology and the history of Muslims. Here Al Mahmud presents Bakhtier Khilji as a symbol of justice, an emissary to free the suppressed humanity, a chivalrous Mujahid at whose appearance 'jalim palai khirki deye'/'dictator escapes through back door. This historical event naturally revives all freedom loving people's spirit. Another thing is notable here, Al Mahmud shows how Muslim mothers can make up the mentality of their children by telling them the true chivalrous story of their own history instead of making them timid by telling fictitious false ghostly stories. In this poem, the mother very nicely tells her boy-child when she is trying to lull him, how Bakhtier riding on white horse is coming with seventeen soldiers with open swords to fight against the dictator who enslaved human being. The boy becomes curious to know about Bakhtier Khilji. Mother replies that he is the soldier of Allah, and the king of the suppressed poor people. She /mother makes her child visionary and dreamy. The child seems to hear in the pillow his own heart-beat as the sound of horses toe. Al Mahmud now wants that inspired boy to fight against all injustice because there is no way but fighting to bring back peace in the world. But for success in jihad the poet feels extreme need of Allah's help to save humanity.

To get the help of Allah, Al Mahmud prays at a dignified night. He writes a nice poem on 'Qadr Night' (Lailatul Qadre), a superbly dignified night when the holy Quran was revealed to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Allah Subhanahu Ta'ala declares that this night is better than thousands of months.

The Night of Power
Is better than
A thousand Months.
Therein come down
The Angels and the Spirit
By Allah's permission,
On every errand :
Peace!This
Until the rise of morn!

(Al Qur'an, 97:3-5, The Holy Qur'an translation by
Abdullah Yusuf Ali)

So, prostrating himself at this night, Al Mahmud earnestly prays to Allah not for any trivial personal things or for his personal redemption hereafter, but he prays to save the liberty of his nation of which majority people are Muslims. He earnestly and humbly prays not to destroy the nation for the sins committed by their kings because Allah says that no person will shoulder the burden of sin of others. As Allah says,

No bearer of burdens
Can bear the burden
Of another; (Al Qur'an 17: 15).
That was a people that has
Passed away. They shall reap
The fruit of what they did,
And you of what you do!
Of their merits

There is no question in your case: (Al Qur'an,
2:141)

He expresses his extreme fear of losing liberty at the hands of idol-worshippers and so he importunates to Allah not to handover the string of liberty to powerful pagans. He justifies his importunities saying that the people of his country by generation were servants of Allah and in the past they never escaped from any jihad in the path of Allah. The poet also assures that the prostrated children will finally choose the solution of blood and bomb if only the mercy of Allah is with them. He prays to rescue his country from evil darkness, save the people from robbers and hijackers, protect the educational institutions from the hands of bandits and to bestow knowledge on all people. An extract from the poem will make it clear,

O Allah
O Lord of all rising and declining rays
Bestow all sorts of blessings of this great holy night on
me.

.....

O Allah,

The lord of the holiest night,

We know you don't impose one's sin upon
another.

O you who promised that the father's sin
wouldn't touch the son,

Look, with more than a thousand human
corpses we are prostrating in this blessed night

When the holy Qur'an was revealed
O Allah, don't destroy us for the sin of our kings
and princes.

Why would you like to give an old monotheistic
people's rope of freedom

Into the hands of the brute idolaters!

Haven't we been your slaves for generations?

Never have we retreated from any jihad in your name.

If you bless

Our prostrating children also will at last choose the
solution through bullets and blood

(A Prayer at Kadr Night, Al Mahmud in English, p 54-
55)

His concern for his motherland is very touching here. Here he prays for the optimum instead of any trivial thing. He gives topmost priority to liberty and knowledge in his prayer. Thus Al Mahmud upholds Islamic norm of prayer making jihad its essence. He also glorifies prayer by elevating it to the level of Jihad and setting them at the dignified night of Qadre.

Justice of Islam is evidently stated in this poem. Al Mahmud mentions here that Allah does not punish one person for the crime or sin of others; son should not be punished for the sin committed by father (Al Qur'an, 17:15). So, he argues that the people of his country should not be punished or destroyed because of their kings' and forefathers' sin and he ardently prays for this to the Almighty, because He is the greatest Judge as it is mentioned in surah AtTin----- "Is not Allah the wisest of Judges?" (Al Qur'an, 95: 8). Another point is evident here. Islam wants freedom of humanity from the hands of tyrants to save and elevate it.

In the poem 'digbijoyer dhoni' or 'Sound of Triumph Al Mahmud sings the song of liberty and humanity on the background of war of independence of his country. He symbolically describes how he with his fellow people crossed the river of blood after shouldering the chain for a long time. But at last, he and his fellow countrymen have been able to reach on the shore of victory. Still he feels that though they have crossed many rivers, they have not yet given up their slavery. So they crossed the river, made up of their own blood, at dawn. It was dawn and hearing the sound of a miraculous Azan (calling for prayer) floated through their being dropping off all pains and fetters. Al Mahmud feels that freedom is being sounded in the calling of Muazzin (person who announces Azan). Then he prostrates before the Almighty Allah. Then he wants all people to start their unending journey without any pause until they reach the destination neglecting the buzzing of fear, because there was no sign of cowardice and fear on anybody's dress of them. Finally, he wishes the procession to go ahead crossing all sound penetrating the horizon towards Azan, the call, the victory.

Here in this poem, the consciousness of Islam makes him confident as he says,

Our very Azan is our freedom.
 Our prostration is in fact the victory song of humanity.

 Then we, after crossing the river built in our blood,
 notice that it is dawn. That was crack of dawn
 A miraculous Azan floated through our being
 And dropped off all fastenings of fetters and pain
 So, isn't the freedom being pronounced through that
 calling of Muajjin raising face towards the the
 firmament?
 Let's prostrate down.

.....
 Crossing all sounds may this procession pierce out
 the horizon
 Towards Azan

To call
 To triumph.

Here he feels identical with all rivers, all people,
 all birds, and insects, and environment. Al Mahmud

Ash-hadu an-lā ilāha illā allāh
 Ash-hadu anna Muḥammadan-
 Rasulullāh
 Hayya 'ala ṣ-ṣsalāt
 Hayya 'ala l-falāḥ
 Allāhu akbar
 Lā ilāha illā-Allāh

Allah is greatest, Allah is greatest.
 I bear witness that there is no Ilah but Allah.
 I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God.
 Hasten to worship (*salat*).
 Hasten to success.
 Allah is greatest.
 There is no Ilah but Allah.

He also mentions that by the sound of an unearthly Azan, all fetters dropped off from their body and so he assures only this calling of Muajjin announces the sound of freedom of people. Here Al Mahmud hints at the Muslim history of his country where people were freed from slavery after Islamic rule was established. Then Al Mahmud suggests his people to prostrate down to express thankfulness and acquiring inspiration he tells to start their irresistible speed of going ahead towards Azan that becomes a symbol of victory this time.

Al Mahmud takes shelter in Muslim history of Indian subcontinent where Muslim rulers ruled for almost eight hundred years. In this poem he refers to the Indian history of the emperor Kutubuddin Ibeq who was a slave-turned-emperor. He built a high rise tower known as 'kutub minar'. Al Mahmud takes this tower standing unshaken even by rain, winter, summer and all sorts of storms, as a symbol of freedom of Hindustan(India). In this poem, he says that the revolt of a slave-emperor against all types of slavery is only the sign of keeping head erected. As he was a slave, so he built this cloud-touching tower against the slavery of this subcontinent.

And now that tower is a warning against colonialism and imperialistic capitalism. The poet leans on this tower after searching for a room for standing. Here the souls, surrounding him like fire-flies, of many poets are weaving design with light. After a while, he will

appear with his usual images of country life. These images are infused with dome of mosque inseparable from the life of Muslims that form the majority of his nation. Millions of domes of mosques sprout from the existence of this Muslim people making them inspired by the sound of Azan. Here 'Azan' is not simply a call to people for prayer, rather it has become a symbol of independence; as the Muslims through Azan announces the supremacy of the Almighty Allah, only to whom the Muslims bend their heads instead of to any other power of the world. Muslims show their obedience to and dependence on Allah only by prostrating before Him and to no other power. Here 'prostration to Allah' becomes the symbol of victory of humanity because through this prostration all men become equal before Allah without any discrimination among the people. Few lines are quoted from Azan to clarify the idea:

go to the Royal Mosque through the Sher shahshuri Road crossing the old fort to offer Azan. Delhi is near—let it be sung in the roaming and restless poet. In this poem, al Mahmud refers to historical events during Muslim rule in India. Kutub Minar ----made by the emperor Kutubuddin Ibeq stands for liberty and the warning to those who tend to extort the liberty of others. Kutubuddin being inspired by Islam established parity and uprooted slavery among men. So, Al Mahmud's inspiration is evident in his reference to the kutub minar. Here he also refers to 'Azan' that he takes for announcing the greatness of Allah to whom all people should down their heads and to nobody else. So Al Mahmud's desire for fraternity and parity among men gets another vivid outlet here. A few lines from the poem,

I felt
 Kutubuddin Ibeq's large gesture like a huge forefinger,
 The gesture of independence of Hindustan. Standing
 with so straight a head
 That remains unshaken by the force of clouds, rain,
 winter, summer Storms and seasons.
 The rebellion of a slave emperor against all sorts of
 slavery Simply a symbol of holding the head high.

 Today that petrified forefinger is a sign
 Protesting colonialism and imperialistic capital.
 (The Singing Soul of a Poet, Al Mahmud in English, p
 105)

Thus Al Mahmud, standing against the seculars, highlights the very Islamic culture and consciousness inseparable from the Muslims' lives of his territory. As a responsible poet, he regards it his duty to uphold the life, culture and mental make-up of countrymen for whom he writes his poetry. He also upholds Islam's eternal beauty of humanity, liberty, equality, freedom from human slavery.

The revival and fusion of Islamic spirit gives his poetry novelty and diversity. Using very common ordinary words touching the real life of Muslim people Al Mahmud writes excellently humanitarian poems that appeal to all freedom loving people of the world. Being spirited by Islam, his poetry rises to an extra-ordinary height.

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