

## Concept of Culture and Aesthetics in the Qur'an

Dr. Obaidullah Fahad Falahi \*

Culture may be defined as behaviour peculiar to *homo sapiens*. Together with material objects used as an integral part for this behaviour, specially culture consists of language, ideas, beliefs, customs, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, works of art, rituals, ceremonies and so on.

What has been termed as the classic definition of culture was provided by the 19th century English anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor in the first paragraph of his *Primitive Culture* (1871):

Culture... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.

In *Anthropology* (1881) Tylor made it clear that culture, so defined, is possessed by man alone. This conception of culture served anthropologists well for some 50 years. With the increasing maturity of anthropological science, further reflections upon the nature of their subject matter and concepts led to a multiplication and diversification of definitions of culture.

In *Culture: A Critical Review of Concept and Definitions* (1952), anthropologists A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluekhohn cited 164 definitions of culture, ranging from "learned behaviour" to "ideas in the mind", "a logical construct",

---

\* Reader Department of Islamic Studies, AMU, Aligarh, 202002 (India)

"a statistical fiction", "psychic defence mechanism", and so on. The definition or the conception of culture as preferred by Kroeber and Kluckhohn and also by a great many other anthropologists is that culture is an abstraction or, more specifically, "an abstraction from behaviour."

These concepts have defects or shortcomings. The existence of behavioural traditions—that is, patterns of behaviour transmitted by social rather than by biological hereditary means—has definitely been established for non human animals. "Ideas in the mind" become significant in society enough to be useful. The conception of culture as an abstraction led, first, to a questioning of the reality of culture (in as much as abstractions were regarded imperceptible) and, second, to a denial of its existence; thus, the subject matter of non-biological anthropology, "Culture, was defined out of existence, and without real objective things and events in the external world.

Kroeber and Kluckhohn hold that if culture is an abstraction by reasoning and if culture is behaviour its *ipso facto* becomes the subject matter of psychology; therefore they concluded that culture "is an abstraction from concrete behaviour but is not itself behaviour. But what, one might ask, is an abstraction of a marriage ceremony or a pottery bowl, to use Kroeber and Kluckhohn's examples? This question poses difficulties that were not adequately met by these authors. A solution was perhaps provided by Leslie A. White in the essay "*The Concept of Culture*" (1959). The issue is not really whether culture is real or an abstraction, he reasoned, the issue is the context of the scientific interpretation.

When things and events are considered in the context of their relation to the human organism, they constitute behaviour; when they are considered not in terms of their relation to the human organism but in the relationship to one another, they become culture by definition. The mother-in-law taboo is a complex of concepts, attitudes, and acts. When one considers them in their relationship to the human organism—that is, as things that the organism does they become behaviour by definition. When, however, one considers the mother-in-law taboo in its relationship to the place of residence of a newly married couple, to the customary division of

labour between the sexes, to their respective roles in the society's mode of subsistence and offence and defence, and these in turn to the technology of the society, the mother-in-law taboo becomes again by definition culture. This distinction is precisely the one that students of words have made for many years. When words are considered in their relationship to the human organism that is as acts—they become behaviour. But when they are considered in terms of their relationship to one another—producing lexicon, grammar, syntax, and so forth—they become language, the subject matter not of psychology but of the science of linguistics. Culture, therefore, is the name given to a class of things and events dependent upon symbolizing (i.e. articulate speech) that are considered in a kind of extra human context.<sup>1</sup>

Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture* has provided a felicitous and provocative introduction to the understanding of anthropology. It is the best introduction we have to widening of horizons by a comparative study of different cultures through which we can see our own socially transmitted customary behaviour set beside that of other and strangely different people. In her use of this comparative method Benedict spoke for the whole developing sciences of anthropology in the United States, England and France. Her distinction is that she spoke with good clarity and style. On this basis she developed her own special contribution, her view of human cultures and "personality writ large". Her view that it was possible to see each culture, no matter how small and primitive or how large and complex, as having selected from the great arc of human potentialities certain characteristics and then having elaborated them with greater strength and intensity than any single individual could ever do in one lifetime.<sup>2</sup>

### **Islamic Culture**

The holy Qur'an regards culture and temporal life complimentary to each other emphasizing upon the real objective of life itself. The temporal life in the eye of the Qur'an is like the rain that comes in drops and mingles with the earth. Through it, by Allah's matchless artistry, the womb of the earth is made fruitful. All

kinds of good, useful and beautiful grains, vegetables and fruits are produced for men and animals. The earth is covered in its bravery of green, and gold and kinds of colours. Perhaps the 'owner' takes all the credit to himself, and thinks that this will last eternally. A hailstorm or blast, a frost or a volcanic eruption comes and destroys it, or it may be even normally, that the time of harvest comes, and the fields and orchards are stripped bare by some blight or disease. Where is the beauty and bravery of yesterday? All that is left is dust and ashes! What more can we get from this physical material life?

The likeness of the life of the present is as the rain which We sent down from the skies; by its mingling arises the produce of earth—which provides food for men and animals. (It grows) till the earth—is clad with its golden ornaments and is decked (in beauty): the people to whom it belongs think they have all powers of disposal over it. There reaches it Our Command by night or by day, and We make it like a harvest clean-mown, as it had not flourished only the day before! Thus do we explain the signs in detail for those who reflect. But Allah does call to the Home of peace. He does guide whom He pleases to a way that is straight.<sup>3</sup>

In another passage of the holy Qur'an this idea is further amplified. In Surah *al-Hadid* Allah makes it very clear that people not only play and amuse themselves and each other, but they show off, and boast, and pile up riches and manpower and influence, in rivalry with each other. It is further described that the good men take the real spiritual harvest and store the spiritual grain, but the men who are in love with the ephemeral are delighted with the green of the tares and grass; but such things give no real nourishment, they soon wither, become dry, and crumble to pieces, like the worldly pleasures and pomp, boastings and tumults, possessions and friends. The holy Qur'an declared:

Know you (all) that the life of this world is but play and amusement, pomp and mutual boasting and multiplying (in rivalry) among yourselves, riches and children. Here is a similitude: how rain and the growth which it brings forth, delight (the hearts of the) tiller; soon it withers;

you will see it grow yellow; then it becomes dry and crumbles away. But in the Hereafter is a penalty severe (for the devotees of wrong). And forgiveness from Allah and good pleasure (for the devotees of Allah). And what is the life in the world, but goods and chattels of deception.<sup>4</sup>

These Quranic parables explain the nature of our present life and approve the similarities between the life and rain into following:

**(a) Biological Ability**

The Holy Qur'an declares:

We made from water every living thing;  
Will they not then believe?<sup>5</sup>

About 70 percent of the surface of our globe is still covered with water, and it has been estimated that if the inequities of the surface were all levelled, the whole surface would be under water, as the mean elevation of land sphere-level would be 7,000—10,000 feet below the surface of the ocean. This shows the predominance of water in our globe. That all life began in the water is also a conclusion to which our latest knowledge in biological science points. Apart from the fact that protoplasm, the original basis of living matter, is liquid or semi-liquid and in a state of constant flux and instability, there is the fact that land animals, like the higher vertebrates, including man, show, in their embryological history, organs like those of fishes, indicating the watery origin of their origin habitat. The constitution of protoplasm is about 80 to 85 percent water.<sup>6</sup>

**(b) Creative Ability (*Takhliq*)** The holy Qur'an declares:

It is Allah who has created the heavens and the earth and sends down rain from the skies and with it brings out fruits wherewith to feed you.<sup>7</sup>

**(c) Nourishing Ability (*inbāt*)**

It is He who sends down rain from the sky. From it you drink, and out of it (grows) the vegetation on which you feed your cattle. With it He

produces for you corn, olives, date palms, grapes and every kind of fruit: Verily in this is a sign for those who give thought.<sup>8</sup>

(d) **Beautifying Ability (*Taz'in*)**

We send down rain from the sky, and produce on the earth every kind of noble creature in pair.<sup>9</sup>

The word *Karim* here may refer to the more beautiful, more beneficent plants, trees animals which Allah has created for man's use. In Chapter *Fatir*, the holy Qur'an has narrated this beautifying ability of water more clearly:

See you not that Allah sends down rain from the sky? With it we then bring out produce of various colours, and in the mountains are tracts white and red, of various shades of colour, and black intense in hue and so amongst men and crawling creatures and cattle, are they of various colours. Those truly fear Allah, among his servants, who have knowledge.<sup>10</sup>

It is clear that those wonderful colours and shades of colours are to be found not only in vegetation but in rocks and mineral products. In the physical shapes of human and animal life also we see variations in shades and gradations of colours of all kinds. But in the spiritual world that variation is even more subtler and more comprehensive. Only those can truly understand it who have the inner knowledge which comes through their acquaintance with the spiritual world. It is such people who truly appreciate the inner world and it is they who know that the fear of Allah is the beginning of wisdom.

(e) **Purifying Ability (*Tathir*)**

The holy Qur'an declares:

And He it is Who sends the winds as heralds of glad tidings, going before his mercy, and We send down pure water from the sky—that with it We may give life to a dead land and stake the thirst of things We have created cattle and men in great numbers.<sup>11</sup>

The word '*tahir*' also means the purifying things. It is evident that rain water (in pure air) is not only pure water distilled in air and sky, but it is the best purifying and sanitating agent in the largest scale known to us, in the chapter *al-Anfāl*, this point is made more clear:

Remember He covered you with a sort of drowsiness to give you calm as from Himself, and He caused rain to descend on you from heaven, to clean you there with, to strengthen your hearts and to plant your feet firmly herewith.<sup>12</sup>

This verse is related to the battlefield of Uhad wherein Muslims were harassed in the midst of the war. Allah provided them calm which is essential in the battle and in all posts of danger. He sent down the rain that was welcome for many reasons (1) water was scarce both for drinking and ablutions; (2) the Muslim band without baggage or equipment or comforts, found that their thirst aggravated their fatigue; (3) the sand was loose, and the rain consolidated it and enabled them to plant their feet firmly.

This verse implies another point also. "Stain of Satan" both literally and figuratively is removed through the rain. Dirt is physically a symbol of evil, and the Muslims were particular about ablutions before prayer. But the rain also refreshed their spirits and removed any lurking doubts in their minds (suggestions of the evil one) that victory might be impossible in such adverse circumstances.

According to the Quranic descriptions as quoted above, life is like water of rain and in it the five abilities are poured. When these abilities are activated, they convert the society into a dynamic one, produce the creativity in all walks of life, provide satisfaction and confidence, beautify and decorate it and purify it from all kinds of non-desirable elements.<sup>13</sup> It is called cultural activity and the product of this activity is called culture.

The whole society is responsible in the creation, production, development, beautification and purification of cultural activities. It has consequently full right to enjoy with the culture without any discrimination in between the people. Some

class or group when tries to single out the culture for itself and to deprive others the development of culture is stopped and the society is badly affected through frustration, corruption, demoralization and so on.

### **Quranic Aesthetic Sense**

The holy Qur'an does not negate the natural instincts. It meets all the basic requirements and channelizes the human necessities towards the right goal. Allah has created man of best shape and beauty. The holy Qur'an declares:

It is Allah who has made for you the earth as a resting place, and the sky as a canopy, and has given you shape—and made your shapes beautiful,—and has provided for you sustenance of things pure and good.<sup>14</sup>

“The shape and form refer to the physical form as well as to the inborn moral and spiritual capacities of man. As regards physical form, see Milton's description of Adam and Eve “two of far noble shape, erect and tall” (*Paradise Lost*.4: 288). As regards moral and spiritual capacities, they are typified by the breathing of Allah's spirit into man: 15: 29.

He who has made every thing which He has created most good.<sup>15</sup>

Allah's creation in itself is good; it is beautiful in proper proportions, and adapted for the functions it has to perform. There is no evil or disorder in it. Such evil or disorder as creeps in is due to man's will ( as for as the man's world is concerned), and spiritual teaching is directed to train and cure that will and bring it into conformity with the universal order and plan.

Further Allah says:

He has created the heavens and the earth in just proportion, and has given you shape and made your shapes beautiful and to Him is the final goal.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to the beauty and grandeur of all God's creation, He has endowed



man with special aptitudes, faculties and capacities, and special excellencies which raise him at his best to the position of Allah's vicegerent on earth. The word 'beautiful' also includes the idea of "adapted to the ends for which they were created," The word "final goal" connotes not only of mankind, but of all things created, whether material or in the realm of ideas and events. All things return to Allah : as they derive their origin from Him, so is the return or destination of all of them to Allah.

Chapter *al-Tin* its description highlights some other aspects also. Here the text reveals that if man rebels against Allah and follows after evil he will be abased to the lowest possible position (*asfalas safilin*). For judgement is sure. Those who use their faculties in right and follow Allah's law will reach the high and noble destiny intended for them. That reward will not be temporary but unailing:

We have indeed created man in the best of moulds. Then do We abase him (to be) the lowest of the Law.<sup>17</sup>

The word '*taqwim*' means mould, symmetry, form, nature constitution. There is no fault in Allah's creation. To man Allah gave the purest and best nature, and man's duty is to preserve the pattern on which Allah has made him. But by making him His vicegerent, Allah exalted him in *posse* even higher than angels, for the angels had to make obedience to him. But man's position as vicegerent also gives him will and discretion, and if he uses them wrongly he falls even lower than the beasts.

Aesthetic sense in the holy Qur'an may be treated in terms of '*jamal*', *surur*, *ishtiha*, *ladhdhah*, *qurratu ayunin* and so on. In the chapter *al-Nahl* the holy Qur'an verifies the sense of beauty (*jamal*) and moulds it to the spiritual truth:

And you have a sense of pride and beauty in them [the cattle] as you drive them home in the evening, and as you lead them forth to pasture in the morning.<sup>18</sup>

The good man is proud of his cattle and is good to them. As they go to, and

return from, pasture morning and evening, he has a sense of his power and wealth and their beauty and docility. Will not man turn from these material facts to the great spiritual truths and purpose behind them?

In the second chapter of the holy Qur'an the word '*sarur*' is used to qualify the heifer to be slaughtered by Bani Israel in response to the Divine demand of sacrifice:

A fawn-coloured heifer pure and rich in tone, the admiration of beholders!<sup>19</sup>

Here the lesson is plain and simple. "Prophet Moses announced the sacrifice to the Israelites and they treated it as a jest. When Moses continued solemnly to ask for the sacrifice, they put him off on one pretext and another asking a number of questions which they could have answered themselves if they have listened to Moses's directions. Their questions were carping criticisms rather than the result of a desire for information. It was a mere thin pretence that they were genuinely seeking for guidance. When at last they were driven into a corner, they made the sacrifice, but the will was wanting, which would have the sacrifice efficacious for purification from sin. The real reason for their prevarications was their guilty conscience."

The holy Qur'an picturized the 'garden in the heaven' as most beautiful to eye, mind and soul; as that is restful and in tune, a complete state of bliss, such as we can scarcely conceive of in this troubled world. We shall have all our near and dear ones (wives) with us: perfected love will not be content with self, but like a note of music will find its melody in communion with others. The richest and most beautiful vessels will minister to our purified desires, and give complete and eternal satisfaction to our souls in every way. The description of this scene is remarkable:

Enter you the Garden you and your wives in (beauty and) rejoicing. To them will be passed round, dishes and goblets of gold: there will be there all that the souls could desire, all that the eyes could delight in: and you shall abide there in (for eye).<sup>20</sup>

This aesthetic sense in the Qur'an is characterized as *qurratu aayunin* (delights of the eye) an idiom for that which pleases most and gives most satisfaction. In our present state we can scarcely imagine the real bliss that will come to us in Future. The holy Qur'an declares:

Now no person knows what delights of the eye are kept hidden (in reserve) for them—as a reward for their good deeds.<sup>21</sup>

Chapter *al-Furqan* mentions the qualities of Muslims and provides a fine code of individual and social ethics as under:

- a) the servants of Allah are humble and forbearing to those below them in spiritual worth
- b) They are constantly, by adoration, in touch with Allah.
- c) They always remember the judgement in the Hereafter.
- d) They are moderate in all things.
- e) They avoid treason to Allah, to their fellow creatures and to themselves.
- f) They pay attention, both in mind and manner, to the signs of their Lord.
- g) Their ambition is to bring up their families in righteousness and to lead in all good.<sup>22</sup>

Here, the prayer of Muslims for the maintenance of Allah's law after them through their wives and descendants is very important. In the eyes of the Muslims, they are not mere accidents or playthings but a real comfort and fulfilment of their spiritual longings:

And those who pray, "Our Lord! Grant unto us wives and offspring who will be the comfort of our eyes, and give us (the grace) to lead the righteous."<sup>23</sup>

The concept of culture and aesthetics are thus based on the basic principles of Islamic values. This culture is totally responsible to its world view, its specific ideas of *Tawhid*, *Hurriyat*, *adl*, *musawat*, *takrim* and so on. It is not confined in fine arts, literature and poetry; it covers all the aspects of human life.

**References and Notes**

1. See for detail, the *New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, (*Macropaedia*), v: 16. Article on *Culture*, pp. 847-893.
2. Margaret Mead's preface in Ruth Banedict, *Patterns of Culture*, Allied Publishers, New Delhi, pp. vii-viii. In this book the author has set before us the problem of culture and has illustrated it by the example of three cultures that are permeated each by one dominating idea. This treatment is distinct from the so called functional approach to social phenomena is so far as it is concerned rather with the discovery of fundamental attitudes than with the functional relations of every cultural item.
3. *The Qur'an*, 10:24-25
4. *Ibid.*, 57:20 .
5. *Ibid.*, 21:30
6. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an -Text, Translation and Commentary*, Amana Corporation, U.S.A. 1989, p. 801,. Note No. 2691. Protoplasm is the basis of all living matter and "the vital power of protoplasm seems to depend on the constant presence of water. See for example, Lowson's *Text Book of Botany*, Indian Edition, London, 1922, p.23; T.J. Parker and W.A. Haswell, *Test book of Zoology*, London, 1910, Vol. I, p.15. The Qur'anic descriptions on the importance of water in the sustenance of all the things may also be studied in other verses. For example *Al-Nahal*: 16:10
7. *The Qur'an*, 14,32.
8. *Ibid.*, 16: 10-11
9. *Ibid.*, 31:10.
10. *Ibid.*, 35:27-28.
11. *Ibid.*, 25: 48-49
12. *Ibid.*, 25:48-49
13. See for detail, Dr. Naseer Ahmad Nasir, *Islami Thaqāfat* (Urdu). Taj Company, Delhi; 1987. pp. 41-45
14. *Ibid.*, 40:64.
15. *Ibid.*, 32:7.
16. *Ibid.*, 64:3.
17. *Ibid.*, 95:4-5.
18. *Ibid.*, 16:6.
19. *Ibid.*, 2:69.
20. *Ibid.*, 43: 70-71.
21. *Ibid.*, 32:17.
22. *Ibid.*, 25: 63-74.
23. *Ibid.*, 25:74.