Role and Contribution of Shaykh Abdallah Salih Al-Farsy (Tanzania) to Islamic Poetry

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The Zanzibar-born Shaykh Abdallah Salih al-Farsy (1912-1982) was the main populariser and leading proponent of Islamic reformist ideas in East Africa in the 1960s and 1970s. His reform activities have been the subject of a number of recent studies. Yet, little known is al-Farsy’s passion for poetry, which has found expression in most of his literary works. This essay seeks to bring to light how this East African Muslim scholar (alim) tried to use this art as a means of conveying gratitude to his various literary accomplishments and also as an instrument of educating the Muslim masses on salient aspects of Islam.

There is no doubt that poetic skills were deeply rooted in al-Farsy’s family. For instance, his paternal grandfather, Abdallah b. Salih b. Qasim al-Farsy (d. 1939), who served as a pilot for the fleets of Zanzibari ships during the reign of Sultan Sayyid Balaghash (1870-1888), was a great poet. Indeed, in his twenties, al-Farsy was already writing Arabic poems. While he took a radical position against the festivities commemorating the prophet’s birthday (maulidi, Ar. mawlid), considering such celebrations and recitals as “religious innovations” (bid’a), he was very liberal in the use of poetry (mashairi), not only in his works but also in accepting their recital in his presence or honour.

Perhaps nothing underscores his love for poetry better than the fact that al-Farsy begun the preface (dibaji) to his celebrated first complete Sunni translation of the Quran in Kiswahili with the following poem:

Mwanzo kushika kalamu  Naanza kiislamu
Bismilla kukadimu  Na Alhamdu pamoja.
Namsalia Bashiri  Na Alize At-hari
Na Sahaba weny weneri  Na sisi sote pamoja.
Namshukuru Rahimu  Neema zake adimu
Kwa Jadidi na Qadimu  Nazishukuru
Namoja.

In holding the pen, first, I begin in the Islamic way
(By invoking) the Name of Allah, together with His Praise.
I offer Salutation to the Prophet and to his pure descendants
And to the blessed Companions, and all of us collectively.
I thank the Merciful (whose) blessings are manifold
The great and the small, to all (such blessings) I give thanks.

In the same preface, al-Farsy describes his Quranic commentary-cum exegesis (tafsiri, Ar. tafsir) as “complete and genuine” (hii tafsiri kamili Sahihi ya Qurani). He wrote the following poem, which I have cited in part:

Tafsiri njema  Hii inatoka
Isiyo kilima  Na kutetereka
Kwa yako Neema  Mola Msifika

A noble exegesis, this (is) produced
That has no defect or blemish
As part of your Blessing, Lord the Glorious.
His *tafsir*, entitled *Qurani Takatifu* (“The Holy Qur’an”) also contains a great usage of poems in the form of commentaries. For instance, in his commentary on Q. 57:27 (We sent other messengers to follow in their footsteps. After these We sent Jesus, son of Mary: We gave him the Gospel and put compassion and mercy into the hearts of his followers. But monasticism was something they invented- We did not ordain it for them- only to seek God’s pleasure, and even so, they did not observe it properly. So We gave a reward to those of them who believed, but many of them are lawbreakers), al-Farsy notes that God does not ordain celibacy as a means of attaining piety as claimed by the Christians (*Manasara*). Such imposition on celibacy has been an impossible task for Christians to live up to and many today are hypocritical of their vows. To buttress this point, al-Farsy writes:

> Ujane una simanzi N a mashaka na mavune
> Ujane una majonzi N a mawazo nane nane
> Wala mtu hauwezi Bure asijidanganye
> Autakaye ujane Asishe kutuhumiwa.

Celibacy brings sadness, as well as difficulties and bodily pain. Celibacy brings sorrow, and many thoughts. No person can lead such a life, dare not cheat yourself. Whoever chooses celibacy, will oft be suspected (of immorality).

In his 1964 book, *Saumu na Maamrisho Yake* (“Fasting and Its Instructions”), al-Farsy posits that it is acceptable (*inafaa*) for a Muslim to say the supplication (*dua*) after breaking the fast in Kiswahili. Indeed, he composed the following prototype, in the form of a poem:

> Asubuhi na Jioni
> Na kufunga Ramadhani
> Na Zaka tusiikhini
> Na sadaka daimiya
> Tubaidie na deni

> Tusali vipindi piya
> Mwezi wote kutimiya
> Tufunge kama shariya
> Dua tutakabaliya.
> Pasi mwenye kutuwiya

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> Tuishi ulimwenguni
> Waja wako tuauni
> Dhahiri na batiniya
> Tufungulie riziki
> Uluokoe na dhiki
> Munaimul afaki
> Usiri tuondoleya

Morning and evening, we also establish the (ordained) prayers. And fasting in Ramadan, completing the entire month. The Poor-due should we not withhold, fasting as prescribed we should.

And persist in (giving) charity, accept our supplication.

Keep us free from debt, without any exception. So that we live on earth, in protection and health. Aid us your creatures, (and) fulfil our needs. The concealed and the manifest (of our needs), accept our supplication.

Open for us the Providence, in succession with health. And save us from hardship, while still living on earth. ‘*Munaimul afaki*’, without leaving out anyone. Remove adversity, accept our supplication.

In underscoring the importance of marriage among Muslims, al-Farsy also used *mashairi*. As an admonition (*mawaidha*) aimed at encouraging men to marry, al-Farsy, in his book *Ndoa – Talaka na Maamrisho Yake* (“Marriage-Divorce and their Regulations”), wrote:

> Oa uache khadaa Ya moyo kuhadaa
> Oa atakayefaa Mke anayesiwa
> Oa upate kuzaa Kama ulivyozaaliwa
> Oa utabarikiwa Upendane na mkeo.
> Oa aliye wa kheri Mshikamana na dini
> Oa yai la johari Litie nuru nyumbani
> Oa mdomo mzuri Upendezao lisani
> Oa uwe barakani Upendane na mkeo.
Marry so as to shun deception, of the heart being deceived
Marry the one who will be of benefit, a praiseworthy woman
Marry so as to reproduce, just like you were born
Marry you will be blessed, to be affectionate with your wife.
Marry the merciful one, the religiously devote
Marry the glittering egg, to brighten the home,
Marry the good spoken, with a pleasant tongue
Marry to be in bless, to be affectionate with your wife.

The above poem (only the first two verses out of seven have been cited here) outlines (legitimate) procreation as one of the benefits of marriage. It also identifies a number of qualities that men should look for in a prospective wife, including religious devotion and good character.

Again, in *Ndoa – Talaka na Maamrisho Yake* and in what appears to be a description of wifely duties, al-Farsy composed the following poem on the occasion of his son’s wedding, which was meant as counsel (wasia) to the bride (bi-arusi):

*Sasa tunamuaidhi Bi-Arusi mwenye hadhi
Yalo wajibu Faradhi
Kaa naye kwa mahaba
Haya kwako matuluba
Uonapo uso wake
Mume afurahike
Bashasha kitu kizuri
Ndiyo sifa ya Bashiri
Mtukuze atukuve

Akwambialo lishike
Na awe radhi mumeo
Kila yote ufanyao*

Now we are tutoring, the dignified bride
The things which are obligatory, for her to fulfil upon her husband

Stay with him in love, (and) be an affectionate wife
These are for you to follow, always to fulfil for him
When you see his face, meet it with a smile
Make him happy, grant him his wishes
Laughter is a good thing, which invites all sort of goodness
This was the attribute of the Warner, Our Prophet
Honour him with respect, before his and your eyes
Heed whatever he tells you, and never disobey
Make your husband be pleased, in your entire stay
Whatever you do, let it be agreeable to him.

In most of his works, al-Farsy spices his discourses and viewpoints not only with his own poetic writings but those composed by Kiswahili and Arabic poets. Examples of Arab poets that al-Farsy cites in his *Ndoa – Talaka na Maamrisho Yake* include Abu Tammam (lived in the reign of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mutasim), and Muhammad Hafidh Bey Ibrahim of Egypt.

In conclusion, poetry occupies an important place in the writing of al-Farsy. The examples cited in this essay are only for the purpose of illustration and are not exhaustive. One may opine that the value of poetry is to give colour and bring diversity in the possible options available in conveying a given message. Unlike prose, poetry is more captivating. Al-Farsy, in his use of poetry also succeeded in broadening the potential of Kiswahili as a language of religious discourse in East Africa.

Notes


3. I have translated the Kiswahili word *ujane*, which literally means *widowhood* as *celibacy*.