

# A Comparative Study of the Poetics of Plato and *Qur'ān*

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*This article aims to comparatively investigate the poetics of Plato and Qur'ān and explicate the reasons behind their ambivalent denunciations of poets and poetry in an attempt to open a ground for the meeting of their descendent literary traditions, and to suggest that literature and poetry can proffer worldly outlooks to transcend mundane boundaries.*

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WE have just Religion enough to make us *bate*, but not enough to make us *love* one another.

REFLECT on Things past, as Wars, Negotiations, Factions, and the like; we enter so little into those Interests, that we wonder how Men could possibly be so busy, and concerned for Things so transitory: Look at the present Times, we find the same Humour, yet wonder not at all. (Swift 241)

Appreciating literary creations across linguistic and cultural boundaries is among the primary goals of comparative and world literature studies. This can facilitate reciprocal understanding, celebration of diversity, hence tolerance and peace. But the prerequisite of such an appreciation is to know what any specific culture considers as literature during a particular epoch. The enterprises of comparative and world literature, therefore, are incomplete without comparative poetics.

Earl Miner implies that the study of comparative poetics is even more important than the comparative case studies that focus on two or more literary works belonging to different literatures. He quotes James J. Y. Liu who maintains,

comparative studies of historically unrelated critical traditions [...] will be more fruitful if conducted on the theoretical rather than practical level [...] comparisons of what writers and critics belonging to different cultural traditions have thought about literature may reveal what critical concepts are universal, what concepts are confined to certain cultural traditions, and what concepts are unique to a particu-

lar tradition [...] Thus a comparative study of theories of literature may lead to a better understanding of all literature. (5–6)

Poetics, according to Miner, can either be “implicit in practice,” that could be found in any culture that distinguishes literature from other realms of practice and knowledge, or “originative poetics” which is induced according to the literary system’s most esteemed genre at a particular epoch (7, 216). Accordingly, the social standing of literature, literary genres and writers as well as the public attitude towards them are the main determinants of originative poetics. The study of status of poetry and poets in a society, and people’s opinion about them, therefore, can lead to an epistemological understanding of poetics.

This article aims to comparatively investigate Plato’s and *Qur’an*’s attitudes towards poetry and poets. Plato’s impact on western philosophy and literature is seminal, and his views about poetry have been contended over centuries. Similarly, *Qur’an* has also exerted a considerable influence on the philosophy, literature and culture of numerous countries. I will argue that while Plato and *Qur’an* are similar in their charges against poets and poetry, there are still discrepancies in their attitudes and in the reasons behind their concerns. This will hopefully open a common ground for the meeting of the descendent literary traditions influenced by Plato and *Qur’an*. I hope to suggest that literature and poetry can proffer worldly outlooks to transcend mundane boundaries in the end. Plato’s works, where he attempts to reach the truth, are secular, and of human origins. On the contrary, Muslims attribute *Qur’an* to divine origins as a sacred text that reveals the infallible and eternal truth. Moreover, they belong to two different social, political, and historical contexts as well as cultural and linguistic traditions. These might raise questions about their commensurability. However, the point is not to compare these texts, but to compare the similarities and differences in their attitudes towards poets and poetry, to explain them, and to suggest their impact on their successors and their contemporary implications. I should also clarify that my limited linguistic skills—I only know Persian and English, with a smattering understanding of Arabic—made me resort to translations, and “distant reading,” to borrow Moretti’s term.

Poets and poetry are strictly repudiated in both Plato and *Qur’an*. Plato famously banishes poets from his ideal state. In his *Republic*, he demands strict censorship on what poets say about gods (377e–383c), death and Hades (386a–387c), “lamentations of men of repute” (387d–388d), violent laughter (388e–389a), truth (389b–c), self-control, greed, bribery, evil

originated by gods, and justice (389d–392b), as well as poetry's diction and imitation (392c–397b). Habib concludes that Plato condemns poetry for its mendacity, defiling effect and "its 'disorderly' complexity and encouragement of individualism in the sphere of sensibility and feeling" (28). However, Plato's concern for the truth is also among the reasons that explain his repudiation of poetry.

Plato believes that it is not "wisdom that enable[s] them [i.e. poets] to write their poetry, but a kind of instinct and inspiration." He goes on to add that, "the very fact that they were poets made them think that they had a perfect understanding of all other subjects, of which they were totally ignorant" (*Apology* 22c). As Hamilton and Cairns write,

Art, he [i.e. Socrates in *Ion*] says, is not dependent upon the emotions; it belongs to the realm of knowledge. "Each separate art has had assigned to it by the deity the power of knowing a particular occupation," [...] but poetry is not art; it is not guided by rule as art is. It is inspiration, not knowledge. Poets and their interpreters like Ion are "not in their senses," but "a poet is a light and winged thing, and holy, and never able to compose until he has become inspired, and is beside himself, and reason is no longer in him." (Plato 215)

Plato objects to the fact that poets imitate different kinds of arts without being experts, hence poetry cannot be considered an art itself (also see *Republic* 398a–b). He, therefore, admonishes poets and poetry because of the innate opposition he sees between knowledge and understanding, on the one hand, and inspiration and possession, on the other hand.

Poetry's imitative nature, Plato believes, is its next defect. Imitative art, for him, is the "art that manages to be compelling and realistic by copying the way things appear, at the cost of misrepresenting the way things are" (Moss 422). According to Plato, "there are some three arts concerned with everything, the user's art, the maker's, and the imitator's" (*Republic* 601d). But "the mimetic art," he argues, "is far removed from truth, and this, it seems, is the reason why it can produce everything, because it touches or lays hold of only a small part of the object and that a phantom" (598b). The poet's art is that of the imitator, hence his knowledge is the most inferior one (601d–602b). Although "imitation is a form of play, not to be taken seriously" (602b), the poet still persists in imitating. Therefore, as illustrated in the famous cave allegory (*Republic* 514–517), poetry is three steps removed from the truth. This takes us to the "old [...] quarrel between philosophy and poetry" (607b).

But are these ample reasons to banish poets and poetry from an ideal state after all? Habib enumerates five reasons to explain Plato's castigation of poetry: "(1) its intrinsic expression of falsehood, (2) its intrinsic opera-

tion in the realm of imitation, (3) its combination of a variety of functions, (4) its appeal to the lower aspects of the soul such as emotion and appetite, and (5) its expression of irreducible particularity and multiplicity rather than unity” (36). But he downplays the main concern of Plato who believes that poets are possessed by divine powers, hence out of their mind. Talking about poets, Socrates maintains,

their making is not by art, when they utter many things and fine about the deeds of men [...] but is by lot divine [...] Herein lies the reason why the deity has beft them of their senses, and uses them as ministers, along with soothsayers and godly seers; it is in order that *we listeners* [my emphasis] may know that it is not they who utter these precious revelations while their mind is not within them, but that it is the god himself who speaks, and through them becomes articulate to us. (*Ion* 534c–d; also see *Timaeus* 71–72)

So he is mostly concerned about the influence of poetry on its audience. Accordingly, poets are denigrated to the sixth order of merit—only above artisan or farmer, Sophist or demagogue, and tyrant—in the hierarchical classification of the kinds of lives Socrates offers (*Republic* 248d–e). Yet, this effect needs not always be pernicious, that is why Plato also adds an exception where poetry can be employed to reinforce law and reason: “we can admit no poetry into our city save only hymns to the gods and the praises of good men. For if you grant admission to the honeyed Muse in lyric or epic, pleasure and pain will be lords of your city instead of law and that which shall from time to time have approved itself to the general reason as the best” (*Republic* 607a; also see 397d). Plato, thus, has ambivalent feelings about poetry. On the one hand, he reprimands it as false, immoral, corruptive, and banishes it from his ideal State. On the other hand, he deems it honeyed, godly, divine, and acknowledges its superb impact on citizens.

Unlike Plato’s writings, a sustained set of philosophical reflections does not constitute *Qur’an*: Plato attempts to exit the cave, ascend the mountain, and reach the light of truth, while *Qur’an* already claims absolute and inerant truth originated in divine wisdom. *Qur’an* is the sacred text of Islam which provides its main tenets, and contains, among other things, a diversity of narratives, allegories, and catechetical instructions. It includes a sūra (i.e. chapter) entitled “shu‘arā” (i.e. the poets, plural form of shā‘ir), that dedicates its concluding seven verses to poets and poetry. Shi‘r means poem/poetry and knowledge in Arabic (Wehr 473). Although, as Heinrichs notes, “By far the most prevalent conception of poetry was to classify it as a craft or a science; technical and scholarly competence were considered

indispensable for the poet and became the major focus of attention,” (122) *Qur'an* actually deprecates poetry and scorns poets.

In *Qur'an* also poetry is put against the truth. Since it comprises divine revelation, absolute verity is manifested in *Qur'an*. Skepticism towards poetry's truth was justified on three grounds: first, truth demanded objectivity and accuracy of description, while poetry was not necessarily sincere and consistent. This is especially obvious in its employment of such figures of speech as hyperbole. Second, decorum excluded false appraisals, while panegyric—in the idealization of its subject—and invective poetry allowed for extensive use of exaggerations. Third, figurative uses of language were regarded as untrue or false (Meisami 781–782).

In the *sūra* of “The Prophets,” for instance, the verity of revelation is opposed to the falsehood of poesy. After warning against the impending Day of Judgment, the unbelievers' reason in rejecting the Prophet Muḥammad and his divine miracle, *Qur'an*, is expounded.

THE DAY of Reckoning for mankind is drawing near, yet they blithely persist in unbelief. They listen with ridicule to each fresh warning that their Lord gives them: their hearts are set on pleasure.

In private the wrongdoers say to each other: ‘Is this man not a mortal like yourselves? Would you follow witchcraft with your eyes open?’

Say: ‘My Lord has knowledge of whatever is said in heaven and earth. He hears all and knows all.’

Some say: ‘It [i.e. *The Qur'an*] is but a medley of dreams.’ Others: ‘He has invented it himself.’ And yet others: ‘He is a poet: let him show us some sign, as did the apostles in days gone by.’ (21:1–5)

Because the unbelievers find Muḥammad to be a fellow human being, they suspect him of witchcraft and poesy, and the *Qur'an* of being merely his fantasy or his invention. Its reliance on absolute, divine wisdom is summoned by *Qur'an* to defend these charges. It is allegedly Muḥammad's sole prophetic miracle (hence, the use of word ‘witchcraft,’ because both miracle and witchcraft are understood as supernatural interventions in normal life), yet the unbelievers still demand some evidence (‘sign’) that could prove his prophethood and divine inspiration. Poetry, witchcraft, dream, and human invention are, therefore, put against Godly and absolute knowledge as well as divine inspiration granted to the prophet.

Elsewhere, the accusation of Muḥammad being a poet is strongly rejected and it is maintained that divine prophecy and poesy are not compatible. Contrary to poesy, a divine book demands solemnity and eloquence. “We [i.e. God] have taught him [i.e. Muḥammad] no poetry, nor does it become him to be a poet. This is but an admonition: an eloquent Koran [sic] to exhort the living and to pass judgment on the unbelievers” (36:69–

70). When the “evil-doers” again accuse Muḥammad of being a “mad poet,” *Qurʾān* insists on his expression of the truth.

On that day they will all share in the scourge. Thus shall We [i.e. God] deal with the evil-doers, for when they were told: ‘There is no deity but God,’ they replied with scorn: ‘Are we to renounce our gods for the sake of a mad poet?’ Surely he [i.e. Muḥammad] has brought the truth, confirming those who were sent before. You shall all taste the grievous scourge: you shall be rewarded according only to your deeds. (37:33–39)

Here again poetry and *junnūn* (possession/madness) are identified. As we have already seen, Plato also repeatedly utters the same accusation against poets but on very different grounds. He believes that poets are mad because they are divinely inspired; whereas *Qurʾān* maintains that poets are mad because they are profanely inspired. But the end result of both attitudes is similar: truth is not to be found in poetry (also see 52:29–34; 69:38–43).

But the harshest condemnation of poets is found in the sūra named after them, i.e. “The Poets.” One of this chapter’s main themes is to show how Muḥammad’s preceding prophets, being accused of mantic pretensions, also suffered like him. Verse 221 asks a question: to whom the Shayṭān (plural form of Shayṭān, or daemon/devil) descend? The answer is on any liar and evil-doer, those who tell what they have heard, but these are mostly lies (26:221–223). Then, it is immediately added that, “Poets are followed by erring men. Behold how aimlessly they rove in every valley, preaching what they never practice” (26:224–226). So poets are liars and wicked. They hypocritically preach what they do not practice. Therefore, they must not be followed. These charges have been made by Plato, too, and as he adds exceptions, *Qurʾān* also excludes those true believers who are motivated by self-defense. “Not so the true believers, who do good works and remember God with fervour and defend themselves only when wronged. The wrongdoers will then learn what a welcome awaits them” (26:227). So, the unbelievers accuse Muḥammad of being a shāʾir (poet), kāhin (the priest-like figure whose supernatural connections allowed him/her to predict future, among other things), or majnūn (one possessed by jinn, hence out of one’s right mind) all of which are denied in *Qurʾān*.

Therefore, poets and poetry are denounced in Plato and *Qurʾān*, although exceptions are also allowed at the same time. As explicated above, they both justify their renunciations by appealing to reasons like their moral concerns, poetry’s infidelity to truth, and its origins. These reasons can be understood in the context of the historically contingent conceptions

of poetry's socio-political functions, and its assumed superhuman origins. Had it been just for the poets and their creation, however, Plato might have left them alone. But what actually concerns Plato is the effect of poetry on its audience. Socrates shows that the agential divine possession in poetry is contagious. He likens poetic inspiration to magnetic effect: as a magnet joins an iron chain by stimulating its effect in each single ring, god also inspires a poet, the poet a rhapsodist, and the rhapsodist his/her audience (*Ion* 533d–536). Accordingly, poetry is “dangerous” because “it has the power to corrupt even the best of men, and threatens the stability of both individual and *polis*” (Murray 23). Therefore, Plato sets philosophy against sophistry and his contemporary uncritical culture (Janaway 388).

Moss also contends that Plato is mainly concerned with the impact of poetry on its audience. For Plato, imitative poetry represents things as they appear, not as they actually are, while its characters are role models for the audience to emulate. Yet, his objection to poetry is not merely limited to presenting unworthy models. He maintains that “imitative poetry harms us by ‘putting a bad constitution’ into our souls (605b)—that is, by strengthening an inferior part of the soul and thereby weakening or overthrowing the rule of reason” (438). Moss argues that Plato mainly objects to the corrupting effects of complex, rather than simple, characters in poetry (440–442). Moreover, according to Plato, poetry appeals to the gratification of pleasure rather than reason, hence it is corrupting. Moss, therefore, argues that Plato condemns poetry because, first, it motivates a departure from reason toward irrational passions, and, second, because it arouses intense pleasure in its audience. This pleasure is so strong that it can upset one's soul.

Therefore, Plato is mostly concerned for the audience of poetry. But, the impact of poetry is not limited to the individual level. As Ferrari says, in Plato's milieu, poetry was a publicly performed event rather than an individual reflection. Poetry for Plato is actually “a rhetorical public address” and “a kind of flattery” (*Gorgias* 502d). Ferrari contends that poetry's “theatricality” accounts for Plato's reaction against it, because he believes that this theatricality impedes poetry to render true understanding (92–93). Because of poetry's theatrical nature, it is its immediate effect that is most significant, not how this effect is achieved. Plato, as the result, sees the aesthetic and ethical aspects of poetry as inseparable (98). Similarly, Murray also refers to Havelock who argues that, Plato's “extreme mistrust not just of bad poetry, but of the poetic experience itself, could only be explained [...] as a reaction to a cultural situation still dominated by oral communication” (24).

So the (ethical) impact of poetry on its audience is foregrounded. But to manage this influence, Plato does not warn the audience as a critic might

do. On the contrary, he solves the problem by removing it: he prohibits poetry altogether. This actually clarifies his attitude towards the audience of poetry: he does not trust their wisdom and discernment. In Ferrari's words, "Plato believes that some—most—adults remain in an important sense children throughout their lives" (114). Plato's major objective is to establish a perfect State; that is why he concentrates on the youth and their education. He prefers to remove all he finds pernicious, like poetry, and instead assign guardians for citizens whom they shall precisely follow. This will reduce the probability of transgressions. But we shall not forget that he is writing instructions for the establishment of his Utopia; that is to say, these premonitions are applicable at the stage before the actual establishment of the Republic, not as an indispensable article of its constitution.

Similar to Plato, it is poesy's dramatic, societal impact that explains *Qur'ān's* concerns about and distrust of poets and poetry. Clarification of this point requires a brief survey of the functions of poetry in Arabic literary tradition. Poets occupied a very significant status in pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods. The poet functioned as the spokesperson of his tribe or clan. He articulated and defended the claims and rights of his people, attacked the enemy, and diffused the reports of contemporary events. Moreover, as Arazi also maintains, "aesthetic pleasure" was the primary goal of poetry for philosophers, and it was considered to be "a school for the improvement of the soul" (459). Since it was accessible to a wide range of audiences, it was employed for didactic purposes, too. However, poetry was also arrogantly manipulated to censure and offend people in invectives and lampoons, to eulogize and support unworthy figures, and explicitly discuss excessive carnal pleasures in the Arab world. Jones mentions this as one of the reasons behind Muḥammad's attitude towards poetry. Muḥammad believed that there is "a short step from lampoon to obscenity or, much worse, to the uttering of curses [...] Poets' invective was common and caused much ill will" (112). As some tribes used poetry to attack their rivals, its power could be compared to war machinery. Some were even driven to suicide because of the public shame that satiric poetry had imposed upon them. Yet, although the manipulation of poetry towards such aims is condemned, even satire is allowed if it serves the cause of Islam (Shahīd "Final" 196). Classical satire was also employed toward similar goals. Iambic verses of Archilochos and Hipponax, for instance, drove their victims to suicide (Keane 35). Accordingly, Plato also expresses similar concerns over satire and eulogy in his *Lams* (Book VII, 801e–802a and Book XI, 935e–936b).

The function of poetry and the status of poets fell and later rose again with the advent of Islam. Initially, poets rivaled Islam and challenged the

Qur'ānic assertions regarding the discontinuity of revelation after Muḥammad. Muḥammad was so concerned about satiric verses which took him and his cause as their object of satire that he had some of their writers murdered among whom one can mention Ka'ab ibn al-Ashraf, Abū 'Afak, and 'Asmā' ibnat Marwān (a woman). This clearly underlines the significant status of poets and poetry. Mutanabbī, a poet who claimed prophecy, and whose nickname means one "who acts like a prophet," (Heinrichs 122) and Musaylima the Liar are two more examples. Their cases are more interesting because they partly represent coalescence between the two categories of Muḥammad's rivals: prophets and poets. But after Muḥammad's immigration from Mecca to Madina, and the establishment of an Islamic government, and in the tradition of tribe poets, he actually employs poet laureates, including Ḥassān b. Thābit, in order to reinforce his political position and further his cause. Other poets also followed to perform their socio-political functions by taking parts either for or against the prophet.

Besides the socio-political, performative function of poetry, both Plato and *Qur'ān* state their concern for poetry's fidelity to truth as another reason behind their objection to poetry. This skepticism is rooted in their idea that poets are mad and possessed by some frenzy. In Plato, however, this madness is divine; that is to say, poets are out of their mind as the result of divine inspiration. His magnetism analogy, in *Ion*, in which divine possession and inspiration respectively stirs the poet, the rhapsodist and their audiences parallels the way God inspires the prophet by divine revelation, and the prophet, in his turn, herds his flock. On the contrary, *Qur'ān* posits an opposition between the divine cause and mundane poetry. The divine is what does not resemble the human, and poetry is attributed not to divine but rather to the wicked cause.

But how can the similarities between these two traditions be explained? In his "Poets and Prophets: an Overview," Kugel investigates the long relationship between poetry and prophecy. He demonstrates the Greek influence on Jewish poetry and prophecy, and also shows how Islam's anxiety over the distinction between poetry and prophecy has influenced Judaism and Christianity (12–20). Similarly, Dols also repeatedly underlines the influence of the Judeo-Christian tradition on Islam. According to such assertions of mutual influence, and since the Jewish tradition has exerted considerable influence on Christian and Muslim traditions, one might be tempted to conclude that the similarities of Islamic and Greek traditions are due to mediated influence. However, such a claim demands more evidence and an autonomous study. Here, I do not intend to study the influence of one tradition on another, but to explicate the similarities

and differences of Greek and Arabic-Islamic poetics in order to suggest how this has influenced (the understanding of) later generations of writers and critics. Accordingly, I will attempt to trace the reasons behind some of these similarities in the (nature of the) relationship between poetry and prophecy in these two cultures.

Dodds maintains that Homeric people, circa eighth century BCE, ascribed some actions and behaviors to deities and daemons. One such behavior was insanity which Homeric Greeks attributed to “external ‘daemonic’ agency” (5). After surveying various instances of “psychic intervention” in Homer, Dodds concludes that “all departures from normal human behaviour whose causes are not immediately perceived, whether by the subject’s own consciousness or by the observation of others, are ascribed to a supernatural agency [...]” (13). This, he believes, is because they had no concept of unified personality or soul (15). Therefore, they projected whatever was the cause of shame for them to some extrinsic force (17), mainly because what mattered to them was not guilt or “the fear of god” but shame or “public opinion” (18, 31). So insanity, as a cause of shame, was not attributed to their own egos but to daemons.

Afterwards, Dodds enumerates and explicates the four types of madness that Socrates mentions in the *Phaedrus*:

- 1) Prophetic madness, whose patron god is Apollo.
- 2) Telesitic or ritual madness, whose patron is Dionysus.
- 3) Poetic madness, inspired by the Muses.
- 4) Erotic madness, inspired by Aphrodite and Eros. (64, also see *Phaedrus* 244–245c)

He again reiterates that madness has always been ascribed to supernatural forces, but here he generalizes his statement to a universal claim based on which all primitive people believed in the supernatural cause of insanity. The reason behind this is the afflicted people’s claims that testified to its truth (62–66). This creates an ambivalent social position for the insane: on the one hand, they are ostracized; on the other hand, they are awesome because of their supernatural connections (68). Discussing the first two types of madness, Dodds observes that both Apollo and Dionysus were essential to the Archaic Age. While Apollo imposes reason and order, Dionysus provides opportunities for psychological purgation and carnival freedom (76).

Since the ancient times did not benefit from documented historiography, people depended on poets’ “vision of the past” which was denied to ordinarily people. It is this very insight to past or present that associates

poets to seers; they both (pretend to) transcend the natural world to attain it. So among Muses' gifts is "the power of true speech," (81) which contradicts Plato's major objection against poetry, namely that it is merely a body of lies. Of course, the question of poetic ecstasy is not necessarily bound to its claim to truth. Epic poets, for instance, though they possessed transcendental knowledge, were not frenzied. In fact, Dodds observes that the notion of frenzied poet cannot be traced back before the fifth century BCE. He speculates that this notion might be "a by-product of the Dionysiac movement with its emphasis on the value of abnormal mental states, not merely as avenues to knowledge, but for their own sake." The first writer who we actually know has discussed poetic ecstasy is Democritus, "who held that the finest poems were those composed, 'with inspiration and a holy breath,' and denied that anyone could be a great poet *sine furore*" (82).

Plato is a follower of this thought. As he takes rationality and argumentation as the true tests of knowledge, he denies knowledge to poets and seers, "not because he thought them necessarily groundless, but because their grounds could not be produced." As the result, he subjects poetic creation to censorship. Still, both Socrates and Plato take poetic inspiration very seriously as evidenced in Plato's sustained discussion of poetry (216–217). Dodds draws three conclusions from his discussion of Plato. First, poetry and madness are supposed to be interrelated and caused by inspiration. Second, "the traditional religious explanations of these phenomena were [...] accepted by him provisionally [...] because no other language was available to express that mysterious 'givenness'." Third, though he believes that poets are divinely inspired, he held that they should be restrained by the superior faculty of reason (217–218).

Likewise, *junūn*, possession by *jinn* and/or madness, is a similar accusation against the poets in the Arab and Islamic traditions. The more serious one of the two reasons Jones mentions for Muḥammad's concern for poetry is that "From the beginning the Arabs had linked their poets with magic or, at least, preternatural, non-human forces [...]. There is ample evidence that poets (and likewise *kāhins*, soothsayers) were believed to have a preternatural driving force, given various names: *khalil* (euphemistic "friend, companion" [...]), *jinn* and even *shayṭān* — the Greek *daimōn*" (112). In Arabic, *majnūn* is derived from *jinn*, the plural form of *jānn* (Chabbi 46). "*Majnūn* is the passive participle of the verb *janna*, 'to cover or to conceal'. The passive verb means 'to be possessed, mad or insane'" (Dols 3). *Jinn* and *Shayṭān* were synonyms, especially with regard to poetic inspiration, in the pre-Islamic period. Poets were believed to be inspired by their *jinn*. "Soothsayers and poets were both said to be *madjūnūn*, literally '*djinn*-possessed' or 'in-

spired by the *djinn*” (Welch 1101). Besides in *junūn*, the significance of non-human intervention was simultaneously acknowledged in divination, i.e. access to knowledge (sometimes about future) through metaphysical methods. This is similar to the notion of inspiration by the Muses and oracles in Greek tradition. Prophets have also been accused of being *majnūn*.

According to *Qurʾān*, many prophets have been accused to be *majnūn*. “Muḥammad’s opponents in Mecca, seeing the similarity between the form of his message and the *sadī*” (rhymed prose) oracles of the soothsayers, argued that his messages were not revealed by God but were inspired by the *djinn*” (Welch 1101). *Qurʾān* invariably defends him against these accusations in several verses (see 81:19–25 as an example). Most scholars consent that such verses were revealed at the earlier Meccan periods, before Muḥammad immigrated to Madina. This actually constitutes the incipient stages of his prophethood. As Bauer states, these verses “serve to affirm the veracity of the prophet’s mission against the suspicions of his adversaries, who would accuse a prophet of being either a liar [...], a poet [...], a sorcerer [...], a diviner [...], or a *majnūn*” (539–540). Yet, although they might sound like prophets, they cannot be true prophets, because none of them tells the truth.

The charges of possession by *jinn* or *shayāṭīn* against Muḥammad are invariably denied in *Qurʾān*. One of the most significant cases which also binds the question of possession to poetry is that of *sūra* 26 explained above. Yet, the interpretation of the last verses of this *sūra* has proved to be controversial. I will summarize the controversy that broke between Irfan Shahīd and Michael Zwettler over the interpretation of these verses because it has many implications in understanding the poetics of *Qurʾān*. In a 1983 article, Shahīd argues that these verses do not accuse poets of being liars but they refer to “their inability to fulfill what they had promised to do—to ‘deliver the goods.’” The nature of their promise, he maintains, was to create something similar to *Qurʾān*. So, ‘āya 26:226 maintains the inimitability of *Qurʾān* sublimity and the issue of *taḥaddī*/‘*ijāz* (8). The exceptions of ‘āya 26:227, accordingly, would be Ḥassān b. Thābit, Ka‘b b. Mālīk, and ‘Abdullāh b. Rawāḥa who promoted the cause of Islam in Madina (17).

In 1986, Zwettler maintains that both *kāhin* and *shā‘ir* were believed to be possessed and just repeated the words they received (“Manifesto” 77). “But as discourse their [i.e. pre-Islamic poets] words neither commanded what was good and reputable nor forbade what was evil and reprehensible: poems were not framed nor poets fit to be obeyed” (79). Accordingly, Zwettler sees the denunciation of poets in the last verses of the chapter “Poets” as a denial of their ability for leadership. He argues that poets did not do what they preached, while God’s messengers,

Muḥammad in particular, did follow his own preaching. But he adds another justification as well: obedience (116–119). People are obliged only to God and the prophet Muḥammad and should not obey anyone else, including the poets. Zwettler’s refutations of Shahīd’s **previous interpretation** of this ḥāya as taḥaddī provoked Shahīd’s response where he repeats his previous claims while adding new evidence. He reads these verses as a contingent response to the tension between Islam and specific poets and poetry and maintains that *Qurʾān* does not denounce poetry outright, but merely condemns Muḥammad’s opponents. In the end, Shahīd concludes *Qurʾān* was thought of as setting the standards of literary excellence. “The religious dogma,” therefore, “has thus impacted literature for the last fifteen centuries and continues to do so” (“Final” 219–220).

Zwettler again responded in 2007. He also insists on his previous position by contending that it was necessary to distinguish Muḥammad’s divine message from those of familiar jinn-inspired poets. Rejecting Shahīd’s thesis throughout, he maintains,

Sūrat aš-Šu‘arā’ is a “manifesto” that [...] establishes beyond any doubt the legitimacy and propriety of *OBEYING a certain kind mantic individual*—the Messenger who is indeed “directed” by an unseen power (as were *jinn*-inspired poets and *kubhān*)—, but of obeying him precisely *because* for him, as for other messengers and prophets before him, the unseen *director* is God, **THE** God [...] in Whose name and by Whose authority Muḥammad recites and commands! (155–156)

This, in its turn, inspired another response by Shahīd in 2008. But I do not intend to argue on either side of the argument. Besides the illuminating implications of this discussion on poetry, what is important for my purpose is that there are two interpretations of poets and poetry in the last verses of sūra 26. **First, poets are those who lead people astray from obeying God and his true prophet; second, they constitute a Satanic denomination (rather than erring human beings) and are challenged to create something as sublime as *Qurʾān* (that is to say, ‘ijaz and taḥaddī).**

Also, one should not forget that despite the rest of sūra 26, the last verse is Madinan. Muḥammad faced many challenges from poets at the early stages of his mission in Mecca. He lacked the necessary power to confront his enemies in Mecca, so he had to immigrate to Madina where he gained political and military power. But, after the immigration of Muslims to Madina, and the setting up of some establishments and institutions, Muḥammad employed poetry to further his cause. Many poets who had opposed Islam and satirized Muḥammad were excused by him after the conquest of Mecca. Moreover, several poets, including Ḥassān b. Thābit, Bujayr b. Zuhayr b. Abī Sulmā, and Ka‘b b. Zuhayr served the

cause of Islam sometime during their lives. Among the implications of this shift in the attitude toward poetry and poets is a strategic employment of poetry for political ends which again underscores its significant socio-political status. This can partly account for the fact that in its direct condemnations, *Qurʾān* aims at poets, not poetry as a genre.

Although their contradictory reasons lead to their similar reprimand of poetry in the end, both Plato and *Qurʾān* ironically manifest significant poetic inclinations themselves. Some critics have gone so far as to call Plato a poet. More prudent ones, however, just underscore the poetic quality of his works. Ferrari, for instance, declares that “the dialogues are [...] a poetic and philosophic call to the philosophic life” (148). Likewise, *Qurʾān* also manifests many poetic properties like narration and narrative techniques, and extensive use of rhetorical devices and tropes (Boullatta 204; Kugel 20; Nöldeke et al 28, 63, 98, 117).

One reason behind the extensive employment of poetic devices could be an attempt to achieve the highest societal and political appeal/impact that Plato (with regard to the socio-political order he advocated and in his opposition to the performativity of poetry) and *Qurʾān* (in winning converts and promoting ethics) sought to obtain. In other words, they strategically resort to the possibilities offered by what they denounce, i.e. poetry, in order to promote their own causes. I have already discussed Plato’s concerns with the performative nature of poetry; here I will briefly elaborate on the performative qualities of *Qurʾān*. It is replete with imperatives that prove it was actually meant as oral communication. As Kermani also observes in his discussion of *Qurʾān*, “If a text is explicitly composed for recitation, fulfilling its poetic purpose only when recited or—more generally speaking—performed, it should be viewed as a score [...] Although a score can be read or hummed quietly in private, it is ultimately intended to be performed” (qtd. in Neuwirth “Rhetoric” 470).

As evidenced in the discussion of Plato and *Qurʾān*, poetry and performance (one can also mention ethical concerns) are closely associated in both Greek and Arabic traditions. Yet, *Qurʾān* does not fear public performance and recitation; it is actually made for public performance in order to win more converts, and to assure the faithful of their conviction. Even the title of *Qurʾān*, meaning “recitation” and often “reading aloud,” does signal this sense. Although this might sound like contradicting Plato’s attitude, one should not forget that, ironically, even he also simultaneously resorts to the rhetorical possibilities offered by poetry.

The relationship of poetry and performance inevitably links it with prophecy and possession, on the other hand. The possessed also em-

ployed poetic language and the prophecies and performed recitations. Kāhins (soothsayers), also referred to as “false prophets,” resorted to some literary devices including *saj‘*. Consequently, Muḥammad was accused of being *majnūn*, a poet, *kāhin*, and being instructed by someone else. His revelations were accordingly renounced as tales and fabrications. Jews of the Islamic world, for instance, assaulted Muḥammad by derogatorily calling him a “madman” and “defective.” They had borrowed the latter from his Arab opponents who called him *majnūn*, and associated the epithet with Hosea 9:7: “The prophet was distraught, the inspired man driven mad by constant harassment” (Cohen 154).

Previous prophets were also called insane and magician, but *kāhin* and poet were exclusively used for Muḥammad. This shows the importance of these two castes during the pre-Islamic period, though their statuses declined after Islam. “Muḥammad acknowledged that the *kāhin* received his knowledge from a spirit through possession (*majnūn*), i.e. a personal relationship with a jinn who observes from the sky events below and relays this information to his confidant(s)” (Fahd “Divination” 544). And even *Qur'an* does not deny the transmission of messages through *kāhins* and jinns, although both the profession and its customers are condemned. Nor did Muḥammad “deny the superhuman origin of their [i.e. poets’ and soothsayers’] utterances” (Heinrichs 121). Fahd, furthermore, emphasizes that divination was not condemned outright because Muḥammad’s prophetic vocation was considered its extension (544–545).

Despite his hostility towards poets, Plato has ironically provided the basis of western poetics and literary theory. Likewise, Islam and *Qur'an* have drastically changed the course of literature in Islamic cultures so far as most poets in these traditions heavily rely on religion and *Qur'an*, and frequently emulate, allude to, or react against it. For instance, the Persian mystic literary tradition, that is *adabīyāt-i ‘irfānī*, is founded upon the Qur’ānic heritage, and many Islamic mystics have written poetic works. But this only breeds further ambivalence because, as Stepein notes in his study of ‘Aṭṭār, a Persian poet who extensively integrates ‘*irfān* (i.e. mysticism) in his poetry, early Islamic scholars considered poetry to be un-Islamic (78–79). Stepein asserts that while ‘Aṭṭār believed that Muḥammad graded poetry from bad to good (91–92), he still saw religion and poetry as incompatible (80–81). But as ‘Aṭṭār was himself a poet, these contradictions drove him to apophysis which he resolved by elevating poetry to the level of prophetic revelation. Halman also discerns the ambivalent attitude of Islam towards poets and poetry in *Qur'an* and *ḥadīth*. As we have already seen, *Qur'an* denounces them, while “the Prophet, who also offered his

animadversions, said in a *ḥadīth* considered *ṣaḥīḥ*, or authentic, ‘God has Treasures beneath his Throne, the Keys of which are the Tongues of the Poets.’ The same ambivalence has been true of the attitudes of the ‘*ulamā*’, many of whom approved of verse as an effective medium for the dissemination of the faith, but remained wary of its non-religious themes and seductive powers” (239).

Thus, both Plato and *Qurʾān* are deeply concerned with poetry’s infidelity to truth and its socio-political impact, on the one hand. On the other hand, they are aware that poetry is very influential and highly esteemed in their societies. This accounts for their ambivalent attitudes towards poetry manifested in their repudiation of it while acknowledging its societal impact and resorting to poetic properties at the same time. This has led to comparable similarities and/or differences in the ensuing impact of Plato and *Qurʾān* as two seminal influences not only in the poetics but also in the cultures of many traditions. Moreh, for instance, contrasts Arabic and European poetics:

the poetics of Arabic language should conform to the language of the *Qurʾān* and address itself to serious subjects. As such, a fundamental difference exists between Arabic and European poetics. The European understanding of poetics as a systematic science of literature, as art, as communication, as an expression of culture in history and as a personal creation, was a concept which was not rediscovered by Arab poets until the 20th century. (462)

This is despite Dodds’ suggestion that, “his [Plato’s] general distinction between ‘divine’ madness and the ordinary kind which is caused by disease [...] is of course older than Plato” (65). Later on, he declares that, “the association of prophecy and madness belongs to the Indo-European stock of ideas” (70). This justifies the common notion of poet as possessed in these two cultures. The disparity between these two traditions, however, could be attributed to what Murrin actually implies in his observation. The ancient Greek world did not feature a religion founded upon revealed sacred texts; therefore, poets claimed divine inspiration and relayed the oracles they received. Accordingly, there was no absolute distinction between the poet and the prophet. Yet, this conception was hardly ever endorsed in revealed religions. Therefore, after Muḥammad, the last prophet, inspiration must have been discontinued.

I do not intend to identify the origin of these similarities and differences. I have attempted to expound the similarities and differences in Plato and *Qurʾān* as the founding texts of different literary traditions which have exerted utmost historical, geographical, and cultural impacts, and explain the reasons behind their attitudes toward poetry by historicizing and con-

textualizing them in order to suggest the possibilities that their poetics offer for our contemporary contexts.

According to Plato's and *Qur'an's* conceptions, poetry is closely associated with elation, inspiration, ecstasy, frenzy, and discipline (in Plato), while it also performs significant socio-political, 'worldly' functions. Therefore, poetry (and by extension, literature and hence literary studies) can be seen as transcending and reaching beyond material borders without abandoning material territories. Accordingly, literature can function as something that transcends the borders of gender, sex, nationality, race, ethnicity, and religion (while it does not ignore the long-standing discriminations on these axes); it can *madly* defy and subvert logical rules, regulations, and norms and undermine conformity and the logic of domination. I am trying to suggest that poetry and literature with their ambivalent status in these two traditions might be an alternative to a binary logic (of opposition) and/or to fundamentalism which do not embrace and welcome, let alone promote, poetry. Poetry can function to circumvent them, and provide alternative grounds. I hope this paper has shed a new light on poetics of Plato and *Qur'an* in order to facilitate the understanding of how they conceive of poets and poetry, and convey the contextual reasons behind their attitudes. Since they are among the influential predecessors of many ensuing traditions, the impact of their poetics extends far beyond their immediate literary, cultural, and historical milieu. A comparative study of their poetics, therefore, can hopefully promote cross-cultural understanding, tolerance, and peace. Moreover, as witnessed in these literary traditions, the significant socio-political status of literature which partly arises from its performative nature, and from its transgressive and defiant functions that can provide alternative grounds to common logic and understanding can be employed to appreciate and promote contingent and liberating acts of identity performance.

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## Primerjalna raziskava Platonove poetike in poetike *Korana*

Ključne besede: Platon / *Koran* / primerjalna poetika / literatura / poezija / resnica / navdih

Poetika lahko prispeva k primerjalnim raziskavam in raziskavam svetovne književnosti ter spodbudi vzajemno razumevanje, ki presega meje. V članku avtor primerja Platonovo poetiko in poetiko *Korana* kot temeljnih besedil dveh velikih književnih, kulturnih in zgodovinskih tradicij. Oba obsojata pesnike in poezijo zaradi različnih razlogov, med drugim zaradi njihove nezvestobe resnici, njihovega odnosa do obsedenosti, navdiha in norosti ter zaradi moralnih in družbenopolitičnih vprašanj. Toda njuna drža ni absolutno odklonilna, ampak prej ambivalentna. Po eni strani pesnike in poezijo obsojata, po drugi pa dopuščata izjeme in se celo zateketa k možnostim, ki jih ponujajo, da bi dosegla svoje cilje. Kljub podobnim obtožbam pesnikov in poezije so med Platonom in *Koranom* razvidne razlike v njihovih stališčih in razlogih za njune pomisleke, ki so večinoma posledica njihovih zgodovinsko pogojenih predstav o družbeni, politični in zgodovinski funkciji poezije ter o njenem domnevno nadčlo-

veškem izvoru. Izkaže se, da je pri Platonu in v *Korani* poezija tesno povezana z vzhičenostjo, navdihom, ekstazo in norostjo, hkrati pa opravlja pomembne družbenopolitične ali »svetovljanske« funkcije. Ti dve tradiciji torej verjameta, da lahko literatura prestopi materialne meje in seže čeznje, ne da bi pri tem zapustila materialne teritorije. Ambivalenten položaj poezije in literature jima omogoča, da ponudita alternativo dvojni logiki (nasprotja) in/ali fundamentalizmu, od katerih nobeden ne sprejema, kaj šele spodbuja, poezije. Poleg spodbujanja medkulturnega razumevanja, tolerance in miru lahko primerjalna raziskava Platonove poetike in poetike *Korana* ponudi alternative tradicionalni logiki in razumevanju ter omogoči, da se možna in osvobajajoča dejanja performiranja identitete primerno cenijo in spodbujajo.

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