
A Note on the Origins of Hali's

Musaddas-e Madd-o Jazr-e Islām*

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Published in 1879 in the *Tahzīb ul-Akhlāq* as well as in book form, Maulana Altaf Husain Hali's *Musaddas on the Ebb and Flow of Islam* (better known as *Musaddas-e Hālī*) is a unique text. The poem, which recalls a glorious Islamic past and mourns its decline in India, both drew on the Urdu *shahr āshob* tradition that had developed since the eighteenth century as well as innovatively developed a very Arabic “flavour” and style that was uncommon at the time. While C. Shackle and J. Majeed have analysed Hali's use of typical Arabic literary devices in their excellent study and edition of the *Musaddas*, they conceded that “the overt influence of Arabic poetry is less easy to establish”.¹ However, new evidence from the *Aligarh Institute Gazette* of 1878 brings another piece to the puzzle and enables us to situate Hali's *Musaddas* in its broader historical and literary context: indeed, two articles written by Sayyid Ahmad Khan in January of that year show that Hali's masterpiece was in fact conceived as an Urdu re-adaptation of an Arabic classic, al-Rundi's famous *Lament for the fall of Seville*.

T. G. Bailey noted in his study of Urdu literature about Hali's *Musaddas* that “no poem has had so great an effect on the Urdu-speaking world”.² In 1879, its publication “took the public by storm”³ and Hali himself was amazed at the success of what he had called a “dry, insipid, plain and simple poem”.⁴ When he reworked the text in 1886, the *Musaddas* had been republished six times, recited in innumerable gatherings (including celebrations for the birthday of the Prophet), introduced in school curricula, used as warm-up for religious assemblies and acted out in dramatic performances.⁵ The poem received immediate and widespread appraisal; it provided the New School of Urdu Literature with a model which

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¹C. Shackle and J. Majeed, *Hali's “Musaddas”: the flow and ebb of Islam* (Oxford, 1997), p. 31.

²T. G. Bailey, *A History of Urdu Literature* (Karachi, 2008), p. 93.

³M. Sadiq, *A History of Urdu Literature* (Delhi, 1995), p. 347.

⁴First Introduction to the *Musaddas*, C. Shackle and J. Majeed, *op.cit.*, p. 95.

⁵See Second Introduction to the *Musaddas* (1886) in C. Shackle and J. Majeed, *ibid.*, p. 99 and S. A. Sandelvi, *Hali bahaisiyyat-i sha'ir* (Lucknow, 1971), p. 263 quoted in S. Anjum, *Monograf Khwajah Altaf Husain Hali* (Delhi, 2007), p. 75.

“directed poetry into a new and fruitful channel”⁶ and generated a veritable “*Musaddas*-mania” in the Urdu-speaking world and beyond, with countless authors copying its style and subject matter. However, despite the stir that the poem created and the consequent attention that it received from scholars, not much is known about the poem’s genesis and some of its particularities – especially its resolute “shift towards Arab inspiration”⁷ – have remained difficult to explain. Hali did not describe the context around the poem’s inception and composition in either of his two prefaces to the work and scholars have usually relied on one letter from Sayyid Ahmad Khan to Hali, dated June 1879, to shed more light on the work and emphasize Sir Sayyid’s decisive role in the composition of the poem. In the letter, Sayyid Ahmad Khan indeed famously said that “when, on the Day of Judgment, Allah will ask me, ‘What have you brought (for your deeds)?’ I will say, ‘I made Hali write the *Musaddas* and nothing else’”.⁸ Although the letter definitely highlights Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s influence in the process, the discovery of two articles written by Sayyid Ahmad Khan and published in the *Aligarh Institute Gazette* more than a year before the publication of the *Musaddas* enables us to shed more light on Hali’s most famous work.

On the 26th January 1878, in the middle of the Russo-Turkish war and several weeks after news of the fall of Plevna reached India, two feature articles written by Sayyid Ahmad Khan were published, occupying an unusual number of pages of the *College Gazette*.⁹ The first article entitled “Elegy on the misfortunes of Al-Andalus” linked the recent fall of Plevna and the contemporary events in the Ottoman Empire with the fall of Al-Andalus more than five centuries earlier. This interesting link was further developed through the reference to, and publication of, a thirteenth-century Arabic elegy which appeared in the following pages of the *Gazette* both in the original Arabic and in its Urdu translation. The *marsiyah* said to have been composed by a certain Sayyid Yahya Qurtubi Andalusi was actually the famous *Lament for the Fall of Seville* (*Rithā’ al-Andalus*) written in the middle of the thirteenth century (sometime between 1236 and 1266) by Abu al-Baqa al-Rundi, an Andalusian poet from Ronda (b. in Seville around 1204 and d. in Ceuta around 1285).¹⁰ After relating the misfortunes of contemporary Muslim countries to those of Al-Andalus, the article continued:

“In this turbulence [the fall of Seville], Sayyid Yahya Qurtubi Andalusi, who was a very great scholar and incomparable poet, was also imprisoned. When he was young, he cried a lot on the ruin of Muslims and in their mourning (*mātam*) he wrote one elegy of which we give you a

⁶M. Sadiq, *op.cit.*, p. 267.

⁷F. Robinson, ‘Strategies of Authority in Muslim South Asia in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries’, *Modern Asian Studies* (2013), vol. 47, n°1, p. 17.

⁸Letter from Syed Ahmad Khan to Hali, Shimla, Park Hotel, 10 June 1879, edited in M. A. Mannan (ed), *Selected Letters of Sir Syed Ahmad* (Aligarh, 2007), p. 10.

⁹The two articles spread over eight pages of the same issue of the weekly gazette (pp. 105–112).

¹⁰Some scholars date the composition from 1248 while others date it from 1267 (See J. El Gharbi, ‘Thrène de Séville’, *Cahiers de la Méditerranée*, 79 (2009), pp. 26–30). Not much is known about al-Rundi’s life: he probably lived in Granada; he is thought to have been a *qazi* and would have composed a number of treatises on poetics, metrics and law (See J. S. Meisami and P. Starkey (eds), *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature* 1 (1998)). The attribution of the poem to a certain Yahya al-Qurtubi, would be anachronistic, if it is the same figure as Yahya bin Umar al-Qurtubi (d. 1172) since the events described in the verses have taken place in 1236, long after al-Qurtubi’s death. (See *ibid.*, p.194). Wrong ascriptions to other authors were in fact very common due to the fame of the poem to which several verses were often added, thus obscuring the date of composition (*ibid.*, p. 372).

translation in our newspaper, and from the incomparable eloquence, rhetoric, simple vocabulary (*sādagī-e alfāz*) and poignant subject of which we need to learn the lesson (*'ibrat pakarā*) of the narrated event; our community needs to look attentively at what Yahya Qurtubi did and at what we are doing. At that time, he was crying over his contemporaries, and at our time, we are crying over our community. Between us and him, the only difference is that he was crying over what had happened, while we are crying over what is happening to our community. He was crying on the dead, we are crying on the living. He recited elegies for lifeless corpses; we are reciting elegies for the corpses of those who, though alive, are lifeless".¹¹

This passage undoubtedly referred to the widespread practice of composing *shahr āshob* or *dunyā āshob* poems amongst Urdu-speaking elites at the time, which Sayyid Ahmad Khan criticised for their lack of simplicity and purposelessness. Al-Rundi's lament – at least the variant that Sayyid Ahmad Khan possessed – was not only seen as a simple elegy but as a powerful tool to awaken the community since the Arabic genre of *rithā' al-mudun* (city elegy) usually built a particular nostalgic framework which served an overt call for *jihād*.¹² The straightforwardness and faith-inducing verses that Sayyid Ahmad Khan admired in the Arabic elegy were hence presented as an alternative to Urdu *shahr āshobs*, a new ideal model for a "moribund" Urdu poetry which could now be revived. In the second article which immediately followed the Andalusian elegy and was entitled "a *Musaddas* on the example of the elegy: on the ruined condition of the Muslim community",¹³ Sayyid Ahmad Khan thus clearly explained the genesis of what would become the most famous poem on the decline of Islam in India, Hali's *Musaddas*:

When I saw the pain of Sayyid Yahya Qurtubi's *qasīdah Marsiyah-e Andalus*, I said to my kind honourable friend Maulvi Altaf Husain Hali that it is sad that there used to be mourners for Al-Andalus but that our times are such that no one until now has mourned the condition of our community. I told Hali: "God, my master, gave you a tongue but you do not speak; God gave you the marvellous ability to narrate but you don't make use of this miracle; God fills your eyes with tears through rain-bearing clouds but you do not let them flow once! The rain falls from the clouds in the hearts of oysters but your tears shall fall into the hearts of men: cry over the condition of Allah's community, write an elegy like Qurtubi's on the ruined condition of the community!"

And so I heartily thank Hali that my plaint had an effect on his heart and that he agreed to my wish and started writing a *musaddas* on the condition of the community designed to tell its story from the beginning to the end so that after [describing] its flow and progress, its decline would have much impact on the heart and our sleepy community would wake up and worry about their own offspring's welfare, progress and education. We copy here at this occasion a few stanzas from this *musaddas* related to the Arabs' condition in the beginning.

¹¹ *Aligarh Institute Gazette* (Aligarh, 26 Jan. 1878), p. 105.

¹² A. E. Elinson, *Looking Back at Al-Andalus: The Poetics of Loss and Nostalgia in Medieval Arabic and Hebrew Literature*, *Brill Studies in Middle Eastern Literatures* 34 (2009), p. 36. The Urdu translation of the end of the Arabic lament reads: "How long will those good people lament? Will no heart be stirred by those imprisoned and killed? [...] If there is a Muslim and faithful in his heart, he will surely pursue *jihād*! For such a man, the *Jannat ul-Mawa* whose splendour is great will be arranged, *houris* and *ghulams* will look at him from heaven." (*Aligarh Institute Gazette*, *ibid.*, pp. 109 and 110)

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

[A dozen of stanzas on the subject from a first version of Hali's *Musaddas* follow.]

As the article explicitly shows, the *Musaddas* was therefore not only written at Sayyid Ahmad's overt demand but on the specific instruction to take al-Rundi's elegy as example, and Hali had been working on this Urdu re-adaptation before the publication of the articles at the end of January 1878. Although the *Musaddas* was a reformist text, creatively adapting the Andalusian model by focusing on the figure of the Prophet and the origins of Islam, it adopted many of the literary devices used in *The Lament for the fall of Seville* which were specific to the Arabic and Andalusian genre. While the Urdu *shahr āshob* tradition never invoked other historical dynasties in its mourning of the fall of North Indian cities, it was a common characteristic of Andalusian *ubi sunt*, which built nostalgia on the ruins of other historical losses and interwove the immediate past with a more distant Arab heritage by constantly evoking the ancient landscapes of the Nile, Mecca or Damascus.¹⁴ Drawing from the genre, Hali too linked the decline of Indian Islam with other exotic and once-glorious Islamic places with a particular emphasis on Muslim Spain, a wink to al-Rundi's elegy. The inclusion of India in a broader historical framework of Islamic accomplishment and decline also directly inspired the title of the *Musaddas on the Ebb and Flow of Islam*. As in the genre of *rithā' al-mudun*, this intensified nostalgia yielded to a sense of shame that was transformed into a call for *jihād*, or in the case of the *Musaddas*, for modernist reform. This aspect of Arabic poetry incidentally concurred with the new utilitarian notions of literature that Hali embraced. As Sayyid Ahmad Khan's articles in the *Aligarh Institute Gazette* demonstrate the decisive Arab shift operated in Hali's *Musaddas* and many of its remarkable innovations were the result of its being an Urdu adaptation of al-Rundi's famous Arabic elegy. The *Musaddas* indeed participated in the increasing pull of Urdu-speaking elites towards their Arab heritage, and the poetic mention of Delhi alongside Cordova or Baghdad coincided with their greater awareness of belonging to a wider Muslim world.

The two articles of the *Aligarh Institute Gazette* enable us to reappraise Hali's *Musaddas*, but they still leave us with unanswered questions: why did al-Rundi's elegy resurface in a North Indian newspaper in the middle of the Russo-Turkish war? And if in January 1878 Sir Sayyid wanted to stress the literary continuum between al-Rundi's *Lament* and Hali's *Musaddas*, why did the information fall into oblivion to such an extent that neither he nor Hali ever alluded to it afterwards? The fact that the poem was published soon after the defeat at Plevna, and the immediacy that the articles imply between the 'discovery' of the poem (which is attributed to al-Qurtubi, a common attribution in Arabic scholarly milieus)¹⁵ and its publication in the *Aligarh Institute Gazette* seem to indicate that Sir Sayyid could have stumbled upon the poem somewhere, maybe in one of the contemporary foreign (perhaps Turkish) newspapers which

¹⁴A. E. Elison, *op.cit.*, p.30.

¹⁵Both Sharif al-Din Mahmud al-Khafaji (d. 1657) and the *Fihris al-Makhtutat of Dar al-Kutub* in Cairo ascribed the poem to al-Qurtubi (See R. Y. Ebied and M. J. L. Young, 'Abu'l-Baqa' al-Rundi and his elegy on Muslim Spain', *The Muslim World* 66, 1(1976), pp. 30-31).

were eagerly read in India at the time,¹⁶ or that he decided that the contemporary events in Turkey represented a timely opportunity to publish al-Rundi's lament and introduce Hali's new work. Arabic literature may have been invoked by Sayyid Ahmad Khan for the promotion of a work that could appear as avant-gardist to the Urdu intelligentsia, when its success was not yet guaranteed, or in a strategy to establish the authority of Aligarh as a centre for Arabic knowledge. More research would be needed to shed light on whether Sir Sayyid was already in possession of al-Rundi's poem or whether he discovered it in the press (or somewhere else) in the late 1870s, but his suggestion that it should be an example for the *Musaddas* had a lasting impact on Hali: when he visited Hyderabad in 1905, he asked a fellow Arabic scholar, Maulvi Hakim Wahid al-Din 'Ali, to rewrite al-Rundi's lament in Arabic "so as to depict the sorry state of contemporary Islam",¹⁷ as Sir Sayyid had prompted him to do more than thirty years earlier. The present discovery is a first step in understanding better the literary influences and transfers between Arabic and Urdu and the process of literary creation in late nineteenth-century North India; the simple and effective language of the *Musaddas*, which stimulated many writers of the New School, was not only inspired by English models but rather by an Arabic one, the directness and religious fervour of which was seen as a path towards regeneration. eve.tignol.2012@rhul.ac.uk

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¹⁶Syed Ameer Ali (1849–1928) for instance remembered that he excitedly read the Arabic paper *Dar ul-Khilafat* published in Constantinople (G. Minault, *The Khilafat movement: religious symbolism and political mobilization in India* (New Delhi, 1999), pp. 6–7 quoting S. R. Wasti (ed), *Memoirs and Other Writings of Syed Ameer Ali* (Lahore, 1968), p. 107).

¹⁷S. Sperl and C. Shackle (eds), *Qasida poetry in Islamic Asia and Africa* (Leiden, 1996), pp. 245–246.