



The Role of Poetry in Rejecting Extremism and Promoting Tolerance and Peace

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دور الشعر في رفض التطرف وتعزيز التسامح والسلام

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Abstract

Extremism is a long-lived negative issue that poses a serious threat to human society. Defining extremism has been a matter of debate for scientists, political authorities and philosophers since there are different definitions of this phenomenon. Poetry is one of the oldest mediums of expression that has been employed as a means to spread love, peace, and unity. Since poetry is a two-edged sword, it has been used as both a catalyst to promote extremism and a weapon to end it. This study aims to explore the positive role of poetry in rejecting extremism, and fostering tolerance and peace through discussing four anti-extremist poems written by poets of various nationalities, religions and cultures. The poems are (A Great Wagon) by Jalal al Din Rumi, (We Too Shall See) by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, (Identity Card) by Mahmood Darwish, and (Home) by Warsan Shire.

Keywords: extremism, poetry, extremist mentality, tolerance, peace.

المستخلص

أن التطرف مشكلة طويلة الأمد تمثل تهديداً خطراً على المجتمع البشري. يعتبر تعريف التطرف امر قابل للنقاش بالنسبة للعلماء والسلطات السياسية والفلاسفة حيث ان لديهم تعاريف مختلفة لهذه الظاهرة. رغم ذلك، يمكن تعريف التطرف على أنه نظام فكري صارم متعنت ينحرف عن المعايير المجتمعية ويرفض شمولية سيادة القانون وحقوق الإنسان. يعتبر الشعر احد اقدم وسائل التعبير التي استُخدمت كأداة لنشر التسامح والسلام. لكون الشعر سيف ذو حدين، فقد تم توظيفه كحافز لتشجيع التطرف وسلاح لإنهائه أيضاً. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف الدور الإيجابي للشعر في رفض التطرف وتعزيز التسامح والسلام من خلال مناقشة أربع قصائد معادية للتطرف كتبها شعراء من مختلف الجنسيات والأديان والثقافات. القصائد التي تم تناولها في هذا البحث هي (عربة عظيمة) لجلال الرومي، (سنرى) لفايز احمد، (بطاقة هوية) لمحمود درويش و (الوطن) لأرسن شير. الكلمات المفتاحية: التطرف، الفكر التطرفي، الشعر، التسامح، السلام.

Introduction

Extremism has always been a force when it comes to changing individuals' lives and human communities to the worst. The most common definition of extremism is simply "the state of being extreme".¹ The concept of extremism is multifaceted and usually mistaken for radicalization. Radicalization is different from extremism in the sense that the former refers to the process in which an individual or a group adapts extreme political, social or religious beliefs while the latter means employing fear, terror or violence to fulfill the desire to alter the current social state.² Extremism is adapted to "justify intergroup violence and ... preparation for and commitment to intergroup conflict."³ It is a rigid uncompromising system of ideas that deviates from societal norms and rejects the universality of the rule of law and human rights. What lies at the core of extremism is the belief that the survival of a specific group relies on destructing any other group that holds different beliefs.⁴ The history of extremism goes back to the ancient times, and continues to be of undeniable significance in modern studies. From ancient texts to modern literature, the concept of extremism has been profoundly rooted in social life. Like any social phenomenon, extremism has been advocated for through roughly any medium of expression that can impact

the way individuals think and push them to question their long-held beliefs. Among the tools that have been exploited to spread this vivacious concept is literature. Extremism has lured into multiple literary works and become a recurring theme in them. It is common knowledge that extremism and religion have been intertwined since the beginning of civilization. Although religion is widely known as a tool of promoting peace and unity, it has always been manipulated by extremists to justify their malicious doings and propagate for their radical beliefs. Ancient religious texts such as "The Old Testament" represent the earliest traces of extremism in literature. The Old Testament is a prime example of embedding extremism in literary texts as a central theme. It is a record of religious enthusiasm among the ancient Israelites, who were ready to shed as much blood as it would take to defend their faith and secure what they considered their territory. A good illustration of religious extremism in The Old Testament is the story of Samson, a biblical character who gave up his life to destroy Philistine temple.⁵ Poetry is universally regarded as one of the most effective means of expression that are used to introduce new views of the world and alter its readers' emotions. Extremist groups often use poetry to appeal to young individuals whose identity issues make them feel marginalized by society. The use of poetry allows them to create a sense of belonging among their followers, therefore makes it easier for them to control their actions. In the past, poetry was originally written to spread moral stories and bring people together through expressing shared desires and experiences. However, in recent years, weaponizing poetry against its original purposes by extremist groups has become a serious problem. Using poetry to justify the brutality of their extremist agendas, extremists have succeeded in convincing dozens of young individuals to join their radical violent groups. Since the process of exploiting poetry has been fruitful in terms of populating extremist groups, writing poetry of radical themes has continued to thrive and become the mouthpiece of whatever group of radicals that rises up in society. The poetic works of the extremist group of Al-Qaeda are an example of the extremist poetry that has been used as a battle tactic to make more people fall prey to extremism. Osama Bin Laden, who is the founding Saudi-born leader of Al-Qaeda, has used poetry as a means to express his radical beliefs and foster violent attitudes towards Western countries. Flagg Miller, a scholar and a professor of religious studies, suggests that Laden's poems reveal his vicious intentions behind writing poetry and describes him as "the entertainer with an agenda".⁶ In his poetry, Laden does not only spread the teachings of extremism, but also justifies and advocates for violence as a way of attaining what he considers a noble goal. His poems do not only encourage extremism, but also project violence as a heroic and glorious trait.⁷ However, poets have reacted to the extremist groups' exploitation of poetry by producing a fascinating body of anti-extremist and love-promoting poetic works. Their poetics have played a massive role in spreading awareness about the dangers of extremism.

Poetry as Weapon Against Extremism, and a Catalyst of Tolerance and Peace

Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world

— *Shelly, A Defence of Poetry* The recent exploitation of poetry has not demolished its true essence as a medium of expressing love, peace and compassion, on the contrary, it has cultivated poets to fight fire with fire and write poetry that unveils the atrocities of extremism. Being at the forefront of this verbal battle, poets wrote poetry that resist radical mentality and encourage people to stand side by side against extremist ideologies. Since extremism is a global problem, tolerance-promoting poetics of international poets are to be discussed in a chronological order in this section of the study. Rumi's poetry comes at the top of the list, when it comes to discussing poetry of anti-extremism, love, and peace for he is famously known as the poet of love. Jalal al Din Muhammad Rumi, (1207- 1273) who is commonly referred to as Rumi, is a Persian mystic poet whose poetry revolves around the universal message of spreading compassion, tolerance and peace. His works revolve around exploring the human soul and keeping it in touch with the divine presence that lies within it. Gaining World-wide recognition for its universal themes, Rumi's poetry keeps inspiring its readers from across the globe to reject all sorts of extremist agendas⁸. Perhaps Rumi's most famous poetic lines when it comes to spreading love and acceptance are;

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase 'each other'
doesn't make any sense. (A Great Wagon)⁹

In the lines above, which are part of his poem "A Great Wagon" and heavily recited in different occasions all over the world, Rumi portrays a field that humans have long been desperate to find. The field described in these

lines represents a safe space where love triumphs all the extremist ideas that deprive people of being united with each other. These verses denote the futility of extremist ideologies and encourage adapting a more accepting outlook of the world. Another poet whose poetry rejects radical thinking and advocates for acceptance is Faiz Ahmed Faiz. Faiz (1911- 1984) is one of the greatest Urdu poets of the subcontinent. Being arrested for his ideological beliefs and advocating against colonialism, Faiz is unarguably regarded as the iconic voice of resistance. His poetry sharply criticizes political extremism and authoritarianism, and advocates for love, peace and mutual understanding. Faiz's poetry is a record of the dangers of exploitation, the oppression of tyrants, the poor living conditions that the weak have to live under at the hands of capitalism.¹⁰ One of Faiz's most revolutionary poems is "Hum Dekhiengey". "Hum Dekhiengey", translated as "We Too Shall See", is a Ghazal that conveys a message of hope to common people and assures them that they will see the light at the end of the tunnel soon that he says; "Surely, we too shall see./ The day that has been promised, that has been written on the eternal tablet/ When the heavy mountains of justice and oppression/ Will blow away like(fluffed) cotton wool". He promises the sufferers of the tyrants' injustice a day on which they "Will be placed on the high cushion/ throne/ When all the crowns will be tossed /When all the thrones will be brought down ". He reassures them that the fall of evil is inevitable and that the law of God dictates that the ruled will rule. It is noteworthy that Faiz, even though is not a Muslim, uses Quranic references in this poem such as the image of the mountains blowing like "(fluffed) cotton wool" which is part of Surah Rehman and referring to Quran as "the eternal tablet" on which the whole future has long been written. However, Faiz's revolutionary poetry is not restricted to a specific religion, race or country, but rather a universal voice that stands against extremism and relates to the suffering of mankind across the world.¹¹ When exploring poets' participation in raising awareness about extremism, one has to dwell on the great Palestinian poet Mahmood Darwish's stance on this matter. Mahmood Darwish (1941-2008) lived his whole life rejecting the extremist mentality and advocating for peace. Growing up in an environment of war due to the Israeli invasion of Palestine, Darwish witnessed the great amount of destruction holding extremist ideologies could cause and the significance of accepting diversity. Several of Darwish's writings address the evil nature of extremism and express the necessity of encouraging coexistence between different cultures and religions. In his book, "Memory for Forgetfulness", Darwish illustrates that extremism leads to nothing but violence and gives an insightful account of his experience there during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. In this book, he proposes that the reasons behind most wars come down to extremism.¹² One of the prominent poems that Darwish wrote as a reaction against extremism is "Identity Card". In this poem, Darwish pours out his suffering as a Palestinian citizen who is being treated as an internal refugee in his own homeland. He starts off his poem by commanding the Israeli security officer to check his ID card number which is all what is left of his Palestinian identity that he states; "Write down/ I am an Arab". Darwish uses this line as a refrain throughout his poem to emphasize his pride of his collective identity as an Arab. He proudly tells the officer that he has eight children and "... the ninth is coming after the summer/ Are you angry?" to show him that the Israeli extremism cannot defy the Palestinians' will to live and keep their Palestinian lineage. He further articulates that his national and cultural roots trace back to the beginning of civilization. He affirms the Israeli forces that, although they can steal Palestinian lands, they can never wipe out the Palestinian national and cultural heritage.¹³ Although the poem tackles the oppression Palestinians suffer at the hands of their Israeli oppressors, Darwish manages an anti-extremist attitude towards the Israeli population that he states towards the end of the poem; "I do not hate people/ Nor do I encroach". In the concluding lines, Darwish warns the Israeli forces of the dangers of taking their ethnic extremism against the Palestinians too far that he writes; " But if I become hungry/ The usurper's flesh will be my food/ Beware .../ Beware .../ Of my hunger/ And my anger". It is worth mentioning that, although "Identity Card" has been deemed anti-Semitic by an Israeli judge, it challenges the idea of extremism and proposes that the concept of identity goes beyond borders.¹⁴ Warsan Shire is one of the remarkable living poets who has tackled the issue of extremism in her poetry. She was born in Kenya in 1988. Shire is a British- Somali poet whom has been credited for writing thought- provoking poetry. Having parents who were refugees due to the politically unstable state of Somali and connecting with Somali refugees whom have experienced great hostility for leaving their own country, Shire has decided to write poetry that reflects the dreadfulness of going through life as a refugee or an immigrant and the everyday extremism that one faces once he\ she crosses the borders of his\her homeland.¹⁵ One of her famous poems that addresses the suffering and extremism that refugees experience as a result of preferring to survive in a foreign country over dying in their own is "Home". Shire wrote this poem upon her visit to a refugee shelter and witnessing the harsh realities of living as a refugee up-close. She begins the poem by reminding the readers of the fact that emigrating from war-torn countries is not a choice, but a must to survive. Whatever country in

which evil and destruction prevail, one has to escape that she states; “no one leaves home unless/ home is the mouth of a shark”. Shire uses the metaphor of “the mouth of a shark” to denote the vivacious conditions that drive people away from their homelands. Severe poverty, extremism, unbearable racism, ethnic cleansing, imperial exploitation, and civil wars are some of the forces that can make living in one’s homeland as life-threatening as inhabiting a mouth of a shark. ¹⁶Shire proceeds in her poem by drawing a startling picture of what the countries that refugees emigrated from are like that she writes; “no one leaves home unless home chases you/ fire under feet/ hot blood in your belly/ it’s not something you ever thought of doing/ until the blade burnt threats into/ your neck”. The scene drawn in these lines is horrible, it makes Shire’s argument appealing and touching. Shire continues illustrating what it is like to live as a refugee or an immigrant by referring to the compromises that they are obliged to make just to survive in the host countries that she says; “the dirty looks/ roll off your backs/ maybe because the blow is softer/ than a limb torn off/ or the words are more tender/ than fourteen men between/ your legs/ or the insults are easier/to swallow/ than rubble/ than bone/ than your child body/ in pieces”. In these lines, Shire draws the readers’ attention to the anti-immigration campaigns that are spread in several countries and the anti-human attitude that refugees have to put up with. The policy of exclusion, extremism, discrimination, humiliation, mobbing and defamation that refugees are subjected to by local people and the media in the host countries are what Shire seeks to criticize in this poem. She aims to change the stereotypes and misconceptions associated with refugees and immigrants that the mass media spreads in order not to give the governments of the host countries a chance to refuse letting them in. It is noteworthy that anti-immigration campaigns want the immigrants and refugees to go back to their homelands because they consider them a threat to the cultural, social and economic stability of the host countries. Shire ends the poem by reflecting on the miserable state of refugees and immigrants and underlining that it is the vital instinct to survive that has made them stay in the host countries regardless of the dehumanization and extremism that they are constantly exposed to. ¹⁷

Conclusion

The present study draws on the role that poetry plays in fighting extremism which has become a social phenomenon in today’s society. Through exploring anti-extremist poetics of four eminent poets from different nationalities; Jalal Ad-Din Rumi, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Mahmood Darwish, and Warsan Shire, the vitality of weaponizing poetry against extremist mentality has been underlined. Those poets, along with many others, have managed to put a face and a voice to the millions of people whom have been silenced by extremist groups. Their poetry represents a call for unity, understanding, and compassion. The four poems discussed throughout the study are; “A Great Wagon”, “Hum Dekhiengey”, “Identity Card” and “Home”. Those poems challenge the concept of extremism and break down the barriers of ‘us versus them’ that people have been obsessing over. Moreover, they encourage all human communities to put an end to extremist ideologies and promote love and acceptance.

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