

Islamic Motifs in James Clarence Mangan's Poems (1838-1844)

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Abstract

Although James Clarence Mangan (1803-1849) had never left his homeland, he depicted a vivid picture of Anatolia and the contemporary Middle East with the region's ethnic groups, poets, and geographical and historical realities which he could access only through the published materials available to him. Despite the fact that Mangan's work included various details on the beliefs, historical, and cultural practices of the native people living in the Middle East, not enough attention has been given to his work in Turkish academia apart from a few descriptive studies that focused on the content of his work. However, a close reading of Mangan's works will show that he made various linguistic, cultural, and religious references to the Middle East. Mangan's poetry includes various references to the Middle East which shows his attempts to get out of the epistemological impasse he went through in the western context. In this paper, a descriptive analysis of the content of Mangan's poems written between the years of 1838-1844 is provided to exemplify the Islamic sources he employed in his poetry.

Introduction

The earliest biographer of Mangan, O'Donoghue states that Mangan had a mournful life in Ireland where he had never left (1897: 16). Mangan's life was quite tough since he had a lonely and gloomy spirit in his hometown penning prose, poetry, and translations. O'Donoghue argues that Mangan was a desolate and remarkably genius literary figure producing poems exceeding beyond the borders of Ireland (1897: 16). Arıkan and Birlik express that Mangan translated and rewrote the works of various Middle Eastern poets' that had already been translated by Germans (2017: 8). In his poetry, he delineated a vivid picture of the Middle East with its geography, culture, and history. An analysis of his poems reveals that there are many references to the Middle East even though he had never set foot here. While depicting the Middle East, Mangan created powerful allusions to Islam. Despite this rich content, his poetry remains understudied.

Mangan's translations as well as his appropriation of various Middle Eastern and Asian poems are indeed contextualized as though they were native to Ireland. Lennon argues that "For Mangan, Asia, and the Middle East suggested antiquity, but its literature could also be native and familiar – 'not all are exotics'" (2014: 66). His works, on the other

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hand, "reanimated concepts of antiquity to address Ireland's anomalous modernization and Anglicization in the nineteenth century" (Sturgeon, 2014: 10). Hence, Mangan's appropriations of Islamic and/or Middle Eastern themes, motifs, and personae should be understood within the framework of such personal reaction of the poet to his Catholic Ireland that was becoming more and more modernized, and thus Anglicanized.

The City of Truth (1838) by Mohammed, Niazi VI, represents Mangan's vision of the city "Ranking higher far than Paradise." The place Mangan calls "the City of Truth" differs from the Christian concept of Paradise, although both heaven and paradise are mentioned in the Torah and New Testament as two separate entities. However, in the rest of the poem, the reader comes to see that Mangan's "paradise" is full of Islamic references and allusions. "Selsibil", for example, is mentioned in the Koran as follows "And they will be given to drink there of a Cup mixed with Zanjabil, A fountain there called Salsabil" (76: 17-18, The Holy Kuran). It is inferred that Selsebil is an everlasting and fluid fountain in which rare people attain the merit to drink Zanjabil from it (Cebeci, 2009). The ones who drink Zanjabil from this fountain (Selsebil) is more privileged than the ones drinking wine because Selsibil is placed in a palace-hall, though the latter ones are in a bower. Thus, Mangan's description of this place is the idyllic place where Allah resides. Another important aspect is that Mangan writes Allah in capital letters. Lastly, by writing "whom ALLAH," Mangan might be echoing the sound of "Hu Allah!", the Sufi exclamation of chanting God's name:

The City of Truth (1838)

This fair City is unseen: it lies
Isolated from our earthly ball;
Ranking higher far than Paradise
'Tis the CITY OF THE TRUTH alone,
And of Truth's inestimable All.
They whom ALLAH from the First hath known,
Known and chosen, here are gathered all.
Some drink precious wine, some Selsibil.
Some in bower, some in palace-hall (17-26)

It is mentioned in "the City of Truth" that Mangan might be echoing the sound of "Hu Allah!", and in the following poem named "Passage" translated by Mangan from Hudayi II, it is deduced that Mangan echoes "YA HU" with a sigh. Arıkan and Birlik state that "YA HU! refers to vanity/futility of the earthly life in this context (2017: 18). Hence, it can be inferred that this place is where the earthly life is vanished. Humans should not be devoting themselves to these earthly desires and should not forget ALLAH who is up. In "Passage", "Remember Him whom Heaven and Earth adore!", just like mentioned in the Koran "O ye who have believe! Remember Allah with much remembrance" suggests the point that Allah should be remembered and worshipped through praying and good deeds in this earth (33:41, The Holy Kuran).

In "Passage", the poetic persona is considered to be Hudayii who "alone by birth / Is guided by the Guardian Four alway". Historical studies shows that Hudayi II (Hudâyî Kadîm Mustafa), worked as a muezzin in the Haseki Hurrem Sultan Mosque

during the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent (Yekbaş, 2013). In the poem, Hudayii associates himself with the voice of all who believe the futility of the earth. The poem also acknowledges that “The Guardian Four” refers to the four khalifs next in succession to Mohammed, namely Abubekhr, Omar, Osman, and Ali (Martin, 1996: 364):

Passage (1838) [Hudayi II]

Remember Him whom Heaven and Earth adore!

YA HU!

...

O, trust HUDAYII he alone from birth

YA HU!

Is guided by the Guardian Four alway,

YA HU!

He is alone the Friend of GOD on Earth

YA HU! (33-34, 49-54)

The Western concept of “Reasoning” is attacked by Mangan in a series of his poems. In “Relic”, Mangan breaks away from the reasoning associated with the 19th century Western philosophy. From an ontological perspective, Mangan’s position against such reasoning is closely associated with Islam. In the poem, it is noted that “the Reason of Man” is indeed a senseless dream as Mangan writes “What a senseless dream of the Reason of Man.” Such break away shows that Mangan’s vision of reality contrasts with that of the Western thinkers of his time. In this re-conceptualization, “the Reason of Man” is incapable of understanding the order, harmony, and consistency of the “Great Caravan” that belongs to “Allah’s inscrutable Will and Existence”:

Relic [Of Yusuf Scheiki] (1838)

What a senseless dream of the Reason of Man,

To think it can rifle the Great Caravan

Of ALLAH’s inscrutable Will and Existence,

When the tinkling tones of the Caravan-bell,

As the Caravan moves through the misty Dell

Of the World, are themselves half-lost in the Distance!

Similarly, the poem titled “On the Occasion of the Truce between Russia and Turkey” reveals Mangan’s reaction to the western philosophy. The nineteenth line, “VOLTAIRE, that crookedest of reasoners” demonstrates how Mangan was dissatisfied with the reasoning associated with Voltaire who is known to be the leading figure of the Western Enlightenment.

Allah’s greatness is a prevailing subject in some of Mangan’s poems. In “Night is Nearing”, “Allah Akbar”, is the starting exclamation in each stanza. Likewise, in one of Mangan’s original poems named “the Wail and the Warning of the Three Khalenders”, Mangan writes echoes the uniqueness of Allah by writing ‘La’ lahá il-Allah!’ (There is no God but Allah). As much as Mangan uses the Koran and some Islamic entities in his

poetry, some Biblical allusions are also visible in his poetry. In “Night is Nearing”, Mangan uses a biblical allusion to highlight the futility of the effort of understanding life by writing. “For you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night” (I Thessalonians 5:2-3, Biblehub). Interestingly, Mangan’s Biblical allusion is given under the exclamation “Allah Akbar!”, showing that the Islamic emblem is juxtaposed with the Christian one:

Night is Nearing (1840) [Baba Khodjee]

Allah Akbar!

All things vanish after brief careering;

Down one gulf Life’s myriad barks are steering;

Headlong mortal! hast thou ears for hearing?

Pause! Be wise! The night, thy Night, is nearing!

Night is nearing!

Allah Akbar! (1-6)

His poem “Invocation” starts with “IN THE NAME OF GOD MOST MERCIFUL, AND FROM WHOM ALONE ALL POWER BEGINS”. Here, Mangan partly translates the beginning of the Islamic quotation “Bismillahirrahmanirrahim”. Hence, Allah is presented as the creator of all existences and appears as an omniscient figure. It is also important to note that Mangan writes this part in capital letters to highlight its significance. Similarly, in “To Mailuka” Mangan cites Allah as the creator of all existences who creates day (light) and night (darkness). From a theological perspective, it can be deduced that unlike the Koran which does not explicate day and night in hierarchical terms, the Bible prioritizes the day: “For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness” (I Thessalonians 5:5, Biblehub). On the other hand, the Koran which claims that “That is because Allah merges night into day, and He merges day into night, and verily it is Allah Who hears and sees (all things)” displays that there is no hierarchy between the day and the night as Allah is the creator of both of them (22:61, The Holy Kuran). This finding can be supported by using other pieces written by Mangan such as his poem titled “Life and Its Illusions”, in which he writes “Day dies – Night lives”:

To Mailuka (1838) [Lamii]

SEE THAT GOD SHOULD BE ADORED

FOR DARKNESS AS THE LIGHT;

Allah akbar! GOD THE LORD

MADE NOT ONLY DAY BUT NIGHT. (5-8)

In “Heaven First of all within Ourselves, Mangan focuses on the processes of life from childhood to old age. Through the binary opposition of body and spirit, the former one is associated with the past and the latter with heaven. However, in the nineteenth line “So the heart that in grief looks to ALLAH above, still reflects the same heaven from its depth as before!” the spirit, associated with heaven, becomes privileged as it turns to Allah and prays.

One of the cultural elements that Mangan mentions is Nowruz which is a Persian festival dating back Zoroastrianism and Parsiism (Nōrūz, 2013). The Nowruz festival is in spring during which new roses flourish. In the time of Nowruz, the Earth becomes similar to Eden known as heaven. More importantly, Mangan associates Nowruz with Islam as there is a blessing to Allah for granting these days to humans. As a literary device Mangan uses pun by writing *Nourooz'iz* as it may sound like new roses:

The Days of Nourooz'iz (1840) [Aboul Kazim]

Chor. – Raise the glad chorus in praise of Nourooz'iz !

ALLAH be bless'd for the Days of Nourooz'iz !

Now is Earth Eden, for Nature diffuses

Love, as their soul, through the Days of Nourooz'iz! (5-8)

In “Passage”, the sacred day, Friday is mentioned “let thy day of wooing and wedding both be Friday” which highlights the significance of Friday. In the Koran (62:9, The Holy Kuran) “O ye who believe! When the call is proclaimed to prayer on Friday (the Day of Assembly), hasten earnestly to the Remembrance of Allah, and leave off business (and traffic): That is best for you if ye but knew!” clearly points out the importance of Friday prayer in Islam. It is also critical to express that Friday prayer is cited in a way that believers increase their profit through praying. In addition to this, “turban” is seen as a cultural element of the Middle East geography in Mangan’s poems called “The Thug’s Ditty and Stammering or Topsy Ghazzel by Foozooli” as follows: “All round my turban! ‘tis Necromancy that gets the blind side of the soul!”.

In his poetry, Mangan sheds light on a historical incident which deeply affected the Islamic world; Al-Mohara. In the poem, Mangan associates himself with Islamic people by adding onto their cry in this sorrowful event:

The Howling Song of Al-Mohara (1840) [Arabian]

My Heart is as a House of Groans

From dusky eve to dawning grey;

...

O! the Bloodguilty ever sees

But sights that make him rue,

As I do now, and cry therefore,

All night long, on my knees

Evermore,

Allah, Allah hu! (1-2, 85-90)

Many Islamic characters appear in Mangan’s poems. Firstly, Moostanzar-Billah was the thirty-sixth khalif of Abbasid Caliphate. In the time Baibars, Moostanzar-Billah was given a kiosk to spend his remaining life (Yiğit, 2006). In his ruined kiosk, mansion, there sounds a lullful, soothing music. The muezzin is righteous Moostanzar and he “chaunted the *Allah-el illah*” referring to the Azan. The kiosk has the Godly atmosphere. In the phrase “I mused alone in that ruined kiosk”, Mangan associates his mournful life with the ruined kiosk here:

The Kiosk of MOOSTANZAR-BILLAH (1840) [Arabian]

A Song to the rose, the Summer's daughter!
"The lullful music of TEEGREEZ' flow
Was blended with echoes from many a mosque,
As the Mooezeen chanted the *Allah-eh-illah*

...

For I stood in the ruined Kiosk
Of the Khalif MOOSTANZAR-BILLAH (4-7, 11-12)

Sufism is a prevalent theme in Mangan's poetry. It can be broadly defined as the inner and mystic dimension of Islam that differs from the traditional Islam (see What is Sufism in Schimmel, 1975) (pp. 3-22). Mangan mentions another significant holy figure Imam Ebusuud in "on the Imam Ebusund", who was the mufti (Sheikh ul-Islam) of the Ottoman Empire in the time of Suleiman the Magnificent. Historical records indicate that he issued a fetwa on banning drinking coffee in coffeehouses (Düzenli, 2007: 394). This fetwa was considered to be a prominent protest on Sufism as coffee has been closely knitted with Sufism. And, "Omur, Olum, Allah, Aalem" may be given as the basic faiths of Sufism. He asks Ebusuud "Quære - does he comprehend it?" Quære means query or question in Latin.¹⁸⁵ Mangan questions the mufti about his fetwa. Furthermore, in one of Mangan's original poems "To a Groaner", there is a hadith: "Küntü kenzen mahfiyyen fe-ahbebtü en-u'rife" which conveys the meaning that "I was a hidden treasure and wanted to be known". (Küntü kenzen-Gizli Hazine, 2018). It holds the belief that Allah created this world to be known and worshipped by humans. In the Koran "I have only created Jinns and men, that they may serve Me." explains the reason of the creation of this world (51:56, The Holy Kuran). Likewise, "The Soffees' Ditty" reveals the notion of Sufism in a more concrete way. In the poem, there are virtues that Sufis obtain in this world to attain Allah's mercy in afterworld. Mangan associates himself with Sufis as "we sing" the ditty, tune. Mangan might echo Bismillah by writing it in the chorus. Thus, in these poems of his, Mangan highlights that Sufism is the certain way of understanding the universe, that is, through revelation as advocated by Ghazali. This belief presents a direct contrast with the idea of creation of the universe that was popular in Mangan's time:

The Soffees' Ditty (1844)

Docility, Poverty, Courage, and Meekness,
Wisdom, and Silence, and Patience, and Prayer without ceasing.
Such are the tone and the tune of the ditty that *we* sing.

...

Bismillah! There is no strength or wisdom
But in GOD, the High, the Great! Thou, O,
Soffee, art but a creature of clay; therefore,
Indulge not in pride. (4-6, Chorus)

¹⁸⁵ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/quaere>

Conclusion

Mangan's descriptions of the Middle East geography, culture and practices apparently illustrate that he does not conceive the Middle East as a merely exotic place. O'Donoghue reports that Mangan used original Oriental poems to translate into English, therefore, his translation is considered to be genius rewritings (1897: 89). It is also quoted that Mangan consulted the Koran and read it with delight (1897: 89). According to O'Donoghue, Mangan's use of Islamic images shows a break away from Western traditions that are based on reasoning (1897: 90). Moreover, in Mangan's poetry, it is plainly understandable that his use of Islamic allusions is purely original, respectful, and harmonious with Islamic traditions. Lastly, Mangan's perception of Islam as he reflected in his poetry is based on the neo-platonic conception of the universe as has affected English Romantics especially Coleridge (see Birlik, 2011 for more information, pp. 106-112). All in all, the bulk of Islamic references made by Mangan in his poetry is remarkable when the poet's historical and geographical affiliation with the Catholic Ireland is considered.

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