Futuristic Categories as Conceptual Tools for the Study of the Reliability of Muslim Historical Sources

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Abstract—**Muslim thological literature is a self-referential tradition in the sense that in all its intellectual attempts it tries to reproduce its origins at the time of the Prophet. In other words, it is a quest for authenticity. But, the meta-historical notion of the Advent of Islam is now facing with the problem of objective reliability in modern scholarship; therefore, new methodological approaches are needed to cast light on new dimensions of the problem. The method of 'history of concept' can help us to assess the reliability of Muslim works. By this framework, the historical shifts of basic concepts in the Muslim literature can be represented. As a part of this project, we would limit the scope of the study of basic concepts to those reflecting some notions about future in the Islamic literature; i.e. the futuristic categories of expectation, imagination, decision. Historiography of the basic futuristic concepts can open the way for new assessments of the Islamic literature.**

Index Terms—**History of Concepts, expectation, imagination, decision, Islam, Hadith**

I. INTRODUCTION

The authenticity of the Islamic theological literature has been a matter of long discussions among Muslims from the very beginning of the post-Prophetic period. In response to this challenge, from 9th and 10th century CE Muslim thinkers began develop different tools such as Rijal and Usul to assess authenticity of different narrations [1]. However, for the contemporary scholars looking for objective reality instead of doctrinal authenticity the Muslim literature are questionable. This problem would become more crucial if we consider that the compilation of the Islamic Exegesis, Hadith, Fiqh, Sira, etc. began one to three centuries after the Prophet's death [1]. Although in this article I do not go to the extreme of traditionalist schools to assume Islamic literature as wholly genuine, I believe these texts like any other historical texts are impregnated by historical notions that must be excavated from the deep conceptual layers of the texts. As a part of these series of attempts, we can resort to the methodological tools introduced by German school of historiography called Conceptual History or History of Concepts; it prepares some important tools for the historical analysis of the concepts.

As a basic assumption of this article, it is assumed that historians are social agents who practice the act of historiography in their special social context. The historical texts are written by different people and in different spaces and times; consequently, the language of text has the flavour of its context. By correlating the language of text with context, we can distinguish anachronistic reports from authentic narrations. To introduce a practical tool for these kinds of assessments in Islamic literature, we can use the methodological framework of 'history of concepts' in order to trace back 'basic concepts' of these texts. Among different types of the basic concepts in the historians' language we will only emphasize on the futuristic ideas; a historian can use the "passed futures" to interpret the past. As a matter of fact, I will discuss that by contrasting the futuristic aspects of a given historical report with the acts and ideas of the people in a special period we can reach to new corroborations about history. Among these historical futuristic categories we will refer to "expectations", "imaginations", and "decisions". These three essential categories would help us to examine the connectivity of a special report with a given period.

II. THE QUEST FOR AUTHENTICITY AND SELF-REFERENTIALITY OF MUSLIM TRADITION

As part of doctrinal attempts of the believers, Islamic theological literature is a quest for authenticity. The aim in the Islamic literature was to discover or develop authentic narrations about the Advent of Islam (Sadr-i-Islam). Accordingly, the period of Sadr-i-Islam has been the epitome of the Islamic teachings for the later Muslim writers. This quest for authenticity has had an important presumption that the most perfect teachings of Islam had been represented at the time of the Prophet; this perfect Islam is not subjected to any change, evolution or perfection. In this way, the huge traditional scholarship of the Islamic studies maintained its self-referential nature during the long period of 14 centuries.

Muslim religious literature is a self-referential[1] heritage in the sense that it always tries to answer its problems with reference to a meta-historical notion of 'Islam' derived from Sadr-i-Islam. In the Islamic intellectual works the task was to discover or reproduce authentic narrations of Islam located at the time of the Prophet. Assuming Sadr-i-Islam as the ultimate archetype, Muslims have tried to reproduce this meta-historical phenomenon in their later writings and acts. Accordingly, Sadr-i-Islam has not assumed as a historical period for the historical investigations, but it is a reliable source of humans' problems.

The meta-historical character of the teachings of

1 . The concept of "self-referentiality" is used by some scholars as a feature of the Quran. In this sense, the Quran is a self-referential text since it refers to itself in different verses. In the other words, it seems that "in the Quran a superhuman voice explains to the Prophet and through him to his audience what kind of a recitation it is." [2]

Sadr-i-Islam is related with the Quranic notions. Quran describes 'Islam' as the religion of all the prophets prior to Mohammad, which was in the process of completion until the end of Prophet's life. However, by the time of the last Prophet the complete 'Islam' was introduced to the believers.[2] This complete version of 'Islam' is manifested in the teachings of Sadr-i-Islam. By assuming Sadr-i-Islam as a meta-historical archetype, Muslims stress on its universality too; accordingly, 'Islam' does not belong to a given space or time. 'Islam' is eternal and primordial; it had been God's religion practiced by the creation of Adam and later prophets and will be God's religion forever.[3]

Since the discovery of the authentic Islam was the main concern of the Muslims, they developed different tools and disciplines. The Prophet's succession and the codification of the Quran were the first important problems which challenged Muslim community and highlighted the problem of authenticity of contradictory narrations. Meanwhile, since the later generations of Muslims and new non-Arabs, who were converted to Islam, had had no personal experience of the Sadr-i-Islam, the necessity for collection of the heritage of the Advent of Islam became more crucial. Moreover, the development of Muslim community from a conqueror community to an expanded society (Ummah) gave this heritage the role of a social and political ideology in the later period during the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties. These advancements paved the way for expansion of the scholarly attempts for collection of Hadith and compilation of different branches of works on Fiqh, Kalam, Exegeses, etc. [4]. Following the Prophet's death, huge streams of polemical debates about authenticity began which led to the dispersion and disunity in the Muslim society as well.

From the ninth century onward, different Islamic sciences were established in response to the quest for authenticity. Since Hadith was the main source for the study of Sadr-i-Islam, theologians established different major works to assess and defend the authenticity of this heritage; the two main tools introduced were Rijal and Usul. Muslims engaged in the subject of authenticity of Hadith and Akhhar by examining the two main elements of each narration; namely the chain of transmitters (Isnad) and the content (Matn). Rijal method dealt with the first task and Usul tried to engage with the latter. They have also introduced the exegeses and "the occasions of revelation" (Sha'n-i-Nuzūl) in the Quranic explanations. History and Sirih were also to preserve prophetic tradition [4].

In this way, the whole Islamic literature and tradition serves the doctrinal aim of reproduction of the ideal society of Sadr-i-Islam [5]. The self-referentiality of this tradition connects the present and the future of believers with an ideal Islam which is located in the past. Therefore, classic Islamic studies are oriented toward authenticity instead of objectivity.

III. THE PROBLEM OF OBJECTIVITY OF THE ISLAMIC LITERATURE

Despite all Muslims' intellectual attempts, the objective credibility of their historical sources is assumed problematic in the contemporary scholarship. Muslim historical accounts about the first century of the Islamic history suffer seriously from material heritage and archaeological evidences. On the other hand, there are controversial debates going on about the consequences of late collection of Hadith and history.

We can classify modern scholars into three streams with respect to their position toward the issue of reliability; i.e. skeptics, defenders of reliability and the moderate trend. The skeptic trend began by Ignaz Goldziher; later on Eckart Stetter and Joseph Schacht casted light on new dimensions of the problem suggesting the plausible mechanisms of fabrication of false Hadith in large scale [6]. Meanwhile, some skeptics like John Wansbrough introduced literary analysis as a way to glean reliable information from Hadith. The skeptical literature actually analyzes the nature of the Isnad with respect to the polemical and political aspects and barely considers social features of the society at that time [4]. Assuming the appearance of the chain of Isnad as a subsequence of the polemical debates after Fitnah[4], as supported by some scholars [6], is a one dimensional analysis. The importance of the transmitters in the Arabic society of the seventh century should be understood in the light of characteristics of oral cultures [7]. Hence, in this oral culture reports used to get their validity by reference to the people; the role is now played by reference to written sources and books in the written cultures of the contemporary world. Arab oral culture in 8th century could not separate 'knowledge' from the subject of knowledge. The reliability of Ijma as the consensus of the 'knowledgeable authentic people' was based on importance of human, the owner of knowledge, in this culture.

Contrary to the skeptics, defenders of the reliability of Hadith have based their discussions on the issues that assumed as the weaknesses of Hadith by skeptics. Standing at the extreme side of this trend, Nabia Abbot believes Muslims used to write Hadith and Sirah from the time of the Prophet and Companions. The chains of the transmitters were also a usual method to protect the reliability and authenticity of Hadith [6]. Although the others are not much optimistic, they assume acceptable degree of objectivity for the exegetical Hadith [8].

A middle ground of the scholars such as Gautier Juynboll and Gregor Schoeler, though, do not push the date for the appearance of the written literature to earlier than the end of the first century Hijri, but insist that the early Hadith when taken as whole, converge on a fairly reliable and historically acceptable description [6].

Meanwhile, Islamic traditional literature developed after the collection of Hadith in the later centuries cannot satisfy the need for objectivity in modern scholarship due to its doctrinal approach. The two major traditional tools of Rijal and Usul do not help remarkably the modern scholars since the tools serve the needs of the doctrinal sciences looking for

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2 . The Quran emphasizes that the religion is completed by the time of the Prophet. (Al-Maidah, 5:3)

3 . The Quran constantly connects Islam with the previous religions: "He has made plain for you the religion with which he charged Noah and that which we have revealed to you, and that with which we charged (prophets) Abraham, Moses and Jesus, (saying): 'establish the religion and do not be divided therein'." (Al-Shuwra, 42:13) [3]

4 This period began by assassination of Uthman, the third caliph in 656 CE and led to huge political controversies and disunity of Ummah.

authentic narrations. The development of Rijal relies on the principal of trustworthiness of the sayings of the true believers; and, the latter is based on the assumption that the whole Hadith literature has internal consistency. Yet, as far as Rijal concentrates on the historical arrangement of different layers of transmitters it would be helpful to some extent for modern scholarship. However, the basic assumption of Usul about the consistency of all proper A adith and Akhhar is not accepted due to the existing scepticisms about all three different types of Hadith, namely legal, exegetical and historical [6].

In a brief description, we can see that modern scholars have used different methods to respond to the problem of historical objectivity in Muslim literature. In their way to explain the existence of plausible mechanisms of fabrication of false A adith in a large scale in the history of Islam, Eckart Stetter and Joseph Schacht analyzed comparatively form and concepts in different A adith [6]. Meanwhile, some skeptics like John Wansbrough introduced literary analysis as a way to glean reliable information from A adith. Herbert Berg uses Matn to evaluate the reliability of Isnads [9]. Resorting to the method of Wansbrough of the typology of the Hadiths, he tries to examine the consistency of the style of Hadith in various levels of transmissions. He believes each informant uses several styles or "exegetical tools" [6]. All these methods cast light on new dimensions of the problem but assessment of objectivity of the Muslim literature is still a crucial issue.

Yet, Muslim religious texts are rich sources for historical studies but in order to filter objective reports from doctrinal propositions we need new methodological tools. The intellectual works of the formative period of Islamic scholarship are wealthy sources for history of concept to trace the linguistic and conceptual shifts in different periods. Although this method will not solve the problem totally, it can improve our understanding of these sources.

IV. FUTURISTIC CONCEPTS AS HISTORICAL TOOLS IN MUSLIM STUDIES

The first few centuries of Islamic history were a period of huge sociopolitical and intellectual changes. In this period different disciplines established for doctrinal purpose. In addition, the vast translation movement introduced new ideas from Greek, Aramaic, Persian, etc. to the Muslim society. Consolidation of Muslim dynasties also played major role in these sociopolitical changes. All these advancements went hand in hand with fundamental changes in the conceptual topography of the Muslim Empire, so that basic political and social concepts acquired new meanings. The serial conceptual shifts of basic concepts in this period give a distinguishing character to this era for conceptual historiography.

History of concept is a new trend in the intellectual history. In the twentieth century and as the result of the new methodological changes in the historical studies, this school introduced by German historian Reinhart Koselleck (1923-2006) expressing new ideas about time and language [10]. By stressing the role of language in historical studies, this school believes that in a historical text not only the message and report of the text but also the language itself can help us to interpret the past. This school emphasizes that in order to interpret social and political history we should resort to historical language as a measure. History is not the description of the passive past which is covered under the layers of the time but it is the recovery of the past from different layers of language. As the result of his methodological concern for putting some limitations on the historical investigations, it chooses 'concept' as the linguistic unit in the historical tracing. This position makes Koselleck to object the idea of 'histoire totale' which puts forward a holistic view of the past events and emphasis that by focusing on the historical changes of concepts in their social and political context we can present more accurate historical narrations [11].

In its process of conceptualization, the conceptual historian looks for some important linguistic turns which indicate political and social changes in society. The conceptual shifts in meanings are in relation with the social historical changes during a specific period. Any given social change shapes a historical 'horizon of meanings' [12]. The political and social language in each era consists of a set of concepts among which some have more fundamental status; since, these so called basic or principal concepts engage with the effective trends, phenomena, advancements, etc. The main feature of all basic concepts is that to define them one should describe their history. Through the investigation of the historical changes of these basic concepts in the context of social and political advancements, one can track the long-term processes of the creation of these basic concepts and have better and more comprehensive understanding of the concept- and the history, as well. In "On the Genealogy of Morality" Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche refers to "guilt" (Schuld) as a basic concept which is created through a complete semantic process in a period of time; since these concepts are historical phenomena they are not definable by single statements [13].

According to Koselleck the concept of time is defined socially. In his description of the relative meaning of time, Koselleck believes various individuals and societies have different perceptions of time reflected in their languages; even a given society has different concepts of time in different periods [14]. Accordingly, historical time has a social mode connecting historiography to social sciences. The histories written by different groups of people in different spaces and times are not identical. Therefore, futuristic concepts can be used as an assessing tool in the study of the historical texts.

Futuristic concepts are one of the types of basic concepts highlighted by Koselleck. These are enriched with social and political meanings which are crucial in historical analysis, since, they are a part of the past history. In historical studies one cannot assume the past and the future as two phenomena which are ontologically disconnected. In the study of past human agents, we should bring into consideration the correlation of historical actors' standpoints about the future with their behaviors in the past. This correlation is bilateral; in other words, the past makes the future and the futuristic notions narrow down the possible actions in the past. If any historical analysis of the social events does not consider this

bilateral correlation or miss it totally, it would lead to misunderstanding. Common examples for these sorts of behavior were found in the Marxist regimes and revolutions in which social actors were even prepared to die for the sake of the Proletariats' wellbeing in the Classless Society. Although, it does not necessarily mean that Marxist theorists had illustrated a brilliant story about the future to mobilize people, however, the presumptions of the defenders of communism about Classless Society predominantly limited the horizon of their historical behavior. A historian should interpret the Russian Communist Revolution in 1917 based on the expectation of the revolutionaries about the future.

While the notions about future narrow down the boundaries of the past actions, this future itself is produced in the past by the human agents; in other words, the connection of the future and past is bilateral. To understand the second aspect of this relation, Koselleck tries to show how the changes of human knowledge have modified the religious idea of The Last Judgment from 16th century onwards [14].

Meanwhile, contemporary philosophy rejects any kind of prophecy about future and entitles it with "determinism". A famous motto used by the opponents of prophecy is quoted from the classical saying of Aristotle: "For future events the truth is undetermined." [14] Yet, one can hardly claim that we have not any idea about future. It seems to be an undisputed fact that everyone bears in mind some assumptions, some of which are related to the future, consciously and unconsciously influencing his understanding. As an example, all politicians and policy makers in the process of decision-making have a notion of the future possibilities which helps them to choose the most favorable alternatives and avoid possible troubles – despite the inevitability of blunders; the process is named by Koselleck "prognosis" about future social and political situations [14]. Our past knowledge helps us to make some prognoses about the future according to our estimates of the probabilities. The decision-makers' idea about future of a given policy is made by their speculations about the good possible outcomes. The future is a domain of infinite possibilities, arranged according to their greater and lesser probabilities; humans as active agents play important role in the arrangement of the infinite future by their decisions, expectations and imaginations [14]. To have an idea about future is neither avoidable nor false; as far as it is not assumed as a determined claim or prophecy. They can play the role of guesses about the future. Since historians consider context of historical events in their works, the ideas about the future should not be forgotten too.

In order to analyze the past agent's idea about future in historical studies we need to assign some clear "futuristic" categories of basic concepts. "Expectation", "imagination" and "decision" of the past agent are three categories that can be applied as "futuristic" categories of interpretation of a special historical agent or event. Although one may claim that these categories are subjective, unapproachable and far from objective investigations, this method resorts to language as an objective tools for its descriptions of subjective issues [14].

Koselleck introduces "expectation" as a futuristic category for empirical historical studies. However, since the inner connection of future and past is the basic idea of his theory,

he defines it in connection to "experience". To define experience, he says: "Experience is present past, whose events have been incorporated and can be remembered. Within experience a rational reworking is included, together with unconscious modes of conduct which do not have to be present in awareness. There is also an element of alien experience contained and preserved in experience conveyed by generations or institutions." [14]

While, "experience" reflects the past on the present and future, "expectation" looks to the future: "It is the future made present; it directs itself to the not-yet, to the not experienced, to that which is to be revealed. Hope and fear, wishes and desire, cares and rational analysis, receptive display and curiosity: all enter into expectation and constitute it." [14]

As he describes, past experiences gather and overlap and mutually impregnate each other. In addition, new hopes or disappointments or expectations enter them. This temporal structure of events is called history. However, this process continues and after a while existing experiences expand the limitations and boundaries of the possible future as illustrated previously. And in this way history moves forward [14].

The second category for investigating the future of the past is "imagination" which is introduced by Schinkel. He says: "I have argued that the connection between the two (experience and expectation) is essential; it does not make sense to say that in some period people's expectations are so far removed from their past experiences that the latter provide no clues for understanding the former. It is imagination that nestles itself between experience and expectation. It may be a small nest or it may be a large one, but experience always shapes expectation through the mediation of imagination." [15] The fact that people imagine how their life might be and how it might be different from that of the previous generation will affect their acts in the past and their view about future. A historian has to consider the imagination of the human agent in order to reach to a better account of his social history [15].

In addition to these two, I think we can also count 'decision' as a futuristic category in the conceptual history. While the previous categories have a passive correlation with the historical events, decisions play active role in the formation of the advancements. As an example if we could find some evidences showing that the Arab conquerors had decided to attack the Persian Empire for the sake of the dominance on trade routes, then we can easily explain why they first captured the northern and north eastern parts of the Empire. Therefore, by studying the reflections of decisions in language we can reach to better understanding about the agents' behaviors.

These three futuristic categories can be traced in the basic concepts of the Muslim works. As an example for the Muslims' expectations we can refer to the eschatological concepts such as the concept of Sirat (the bridge-path to heaven and hell) or the "Last Day". The changes of the basic concepts belonging to the category of imaginations can also cast light on new dimensions. Muslims' imagination about the "evil eye" is a good instance which is even mentioned by Quran. [5] Muslims' decision to "expand Islam all over the

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5. Quran *referrers* to 'evil eye' in Al-Galam, 68:51. [3]

earth" is also a Quranic notion[6] which has been a dominant idea in Muslim literature. It is even reflected in the Fiqh principles.[7]

V. CONCLUSION

All in all, the method of history of concepts is rarely used in modern scholarship of Muslim studies. In addition, historians of Islam have concentrated mostly on the past events without special consideration about the categories describing the "Pasted Futures" [16]; i.e. how the future is assumed by the past agents. The existing methods of the Islamic scholarship discuss Muslim history in the past; we can hardly find works focusing on their past in the light of the future. We can use history of concept as a method to trace the conceptual shifts of the futuristic basic concepts in the Muslim literature, especially in the important era of the formative period of 9th to 11th centuries. At the present time although all of the contemporary revolutions in the Arab countries are empowered by revolutionaries' hopes and notions about a better future, we can hardly find such elements in the existing analyses about events of the Arab Spring. All sociopolitical advancements are enriched by people's expectations, imaginations and decisions about their future; despite being mostly ignored. These categories of concepts can be traced in the historical investigations. History of concept is neither the final solution nor the best method for the problem of reliability of Muslim literature; but it would serve as a beneficial method introducing ideas about this critical issue.

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6 . Quran mentions this idea in Al-Anbiya, 21:105. [3]

7 . Based on the two Quranic verses of Al-Abiya, 105 and Al-Nisa, it is concluded in Figh and Usul that unbelievers should not rule on believers. This principle is called 'Nafyi Sabil' (Rejection of the Path).