Book Review

CULTURE OF ISLAM, by (Dr) Afzal Iqbal, Pakistan Foreign Service; first published, 1967; second revised edition, 1974; published by the Institute of Islamic Culture, Lahore: no. 266: pice R s 30.

This is a delightful book and one that is sheer pleasure to review. The author has to his credit the first ever English work fully devoted to the poetry of Jalal al-Dīn Rūmī and is the author of the first biography of Mawlānā Muhammad ‘Ali Jauhar. It is rare indeed for a diplomat to undertake creative writing and to produce such an interesting book; in sum, to evoke the shades of the late Harold Nicholson.

The aim of the book is to study the cultural factors that shaped the pre-Islamic Arabia, the trans-formation wrought by Islam, interaction of the early Muslim culture with the Greek and Persian factors, and the evolution of Muslim jurisprudence and study of the *Ḥadīth*. The work breaks new ground in the sense that it does not study the problem as a study of the history of Islam but takes a broader perspective. It is well written and couched in a very interesting and catching style.

The book naturally starts with the societal structure and ethos of the pre-Islamic Arabia, known as the jāhilīyyah period. A.K. Julius Germanus says of the pre-Islamic Arabic language: "The Arabic language lent itself easily to the expression of thoughts and feelings of the uncouth sons of the desert. This richest of the tongues can pride itself on the greatest number of poets, *surpassing not only the bards of antiquity but of the world's poets*, dead or living. If this assertion seems an exaggeration, it speedily may be verified by undeniable facts. While ancient classic literature boasts of only ten poets of fame, the dawn of Arabic poetry con-fronts them with a hundred" ("Hilāl Nājī, the Poet, in the Light of his Critics," *Islamic Culture*, XLII/3 (1968), 151).

The author has rightly concluded that the tribal rivalry, exploits based upon *sa'ālīk* (brigandage), and the internecine strife that characterised the life of northern Arabia reasserted itself during the Umayyad Caliphate. But this was not the whole fabric of Arabic poetry. It also became mystic and abstract as in the poetry of Ibn Fārid and Ma'arrī. His statement, therefore, about the Arab ethos that: "The Arab mind is incapable of reviewing an object as a whole. He looks only at a certain aspect. He is incapable of a thorough analysis and synthesis of his perception and thought. If he stands before a tree, for example. he does not study it as a whole, but he is impressed by one particular feature of the tree, say, the straightness of its trunk or the beauty of its leaves. ... Not a single subject discussed thoroughly and evaluated fully can be discovered in famous books like *al-Aghānī* (*Iṣbahāni*), *al-'Iqd al-Farīd* (Ibn'Abd Rabbihī), *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* and *Kitāb al-Bayān wa'l-Tabiyyīn* of *al-Jāḥiẓ*. It is diflicult to find in these books any continuity of thought" (pp. 44--i6).

This is a statement that requires further study. Do we then conclude that Ibn Taymīyyah, al-Birunī, Ibn Sīnā', Fārābī, al-Rāzī, and so on display continuity of thought because the first was of Kurdish extraction, the next three Central Asians, and the last a Persian? Al-Kindī, Shaykh Muḥiy al-Dīn ibn al-'Arabī, Ibn Rushd, Ibn Bājjah, and others were full-blooded Arabs, and they have left a system of thought all the same. *Al-Aghānī* is a

compilatory effort and the Umayyad Abu al-Faraj Iṣbahānī could not have compiled it all alone. Nor can Arabic be charged with neglecting drama. Persian also left that genre alone. It is so prone to universalism within what is apparent, one doubts if the Arabic poetry from the early Abbasid period down to the thirteenth century can be surpassed. For instance, the half-Syrian, half-Persian Abū Nuwās says:

اذا امـــتحن الـــدّنيا لبيـــب تكشـــفت

لـــه مـــن عـــدد فی ثيـــاب صـــديق

[The wise man, when he tests the world, finds that it is an enemy that is dressed in the garb of a seeming friend.]

The Yamanite Abū al-Ṭayyib al-Mutanabbi, in a superb couplet, goes even further:

كفـــیٰ بـــک داءً ان تـــری المـــوت شـــافياً

و حـــب المنايـــا ان يكـــن امانيـــا

[Thou, overcome by the extremity of affliction, feelest death would be the cure. Enough is it for the success of death that it should become wish.]

Nor could Arabic poetry be-come confined to the mere delineation of contours and sensuous encounters in the light of the Qur'ānic message. The Qur'ān, especially in the Meccan *sūrahs*, has emphasised, time and again, the limits of human comprehension (sūrah xcvii. [Power] might be quoted as an example) and ushered for the first time in the history of mankind the first ever non-anthropomorphic concept of

God. How different is the context of the *Sūrat al-'Alaq* (The Clot) from the Book of Nahum in the Old Testament:

"The burden of Ninevah. The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite God is jealous, and the LORD revengeth; the Lord revengeth, and is furious; the LORD will take vengeance on his adversaries, and he reserveth *wrath* for his enemies" (1: 1-2).

The burden of the Qur'an is that everything depends upon: "Do good deeds, and you will be requited":

آمنو و عملوالصٰلحت

Dr Afzal Iqbal discusses under "Did the Pre-Islamic Arab Completely Shed His Old Character?" the reliquae that clung to the Arab. He observes: "The literature produced during the Umayyad period, particularly poetry, bears a clear imprint of the preIslamic period. The popularity of the satire, the sentiments of self-pride and scorn for other tribes — these were clearly reminiscent of the days of ingornance and had no coherent link with the rising tradition of Islam. . . . Both tendencies worked side by side in different spheres of life" (p. 67).The tribal orientation of Abū al-Faraj Iṣbahāni, who, despite the eponymous name of Iṣbahāni, was an Umayyad through and through, might explain the discursive nature of his work. Other-wise people like Ibn al-Haytham, the physicist, and al-Kindī, both full Arabs, wrote perfectly coherent works. The state of affairs at the Abbasid court

might ex-plain the hedonism of Abū Nuwās.

The author's treatment of the cultural meeting between the Arab and the Iranian is masterly. I do not know whether in a work of this sort *al-Aghānī* has been quoted so liberally to etch out the impact of Persian ethos upon Arabic, but Dr Afzal iqbal has done so very well — and very convincingly. The Arab gave to the Iranian the prosodiacal system in poetry; the Persian gave to the Abbasids their turban (symbolising the synthesis of the Arab and ʻAjamī elements). Observes the author: "So freely, in fact, did the Arab writer accept the Persian traditions that we soon find the traditions of the Persian court being transplanted into Arab life. Literary meetings, an institution borrowed from Persia, began to be held in a spirit of complete relaxation. At such meetings a poet would recite his latest poem, a musician would entertain with a song, a storyteller would come out with a story, and there would be plenty of witty jokes, repartees, and lively conversation. This manner of meetings was wholly inspired by the Persians. It was, in fact, the court of the Persian

kings grafted on the Arab soil" (p. 100).

Add to this the *Arabian Nights,* and the picture becomes clearer.

The author's discussion of the movement led by ʻAbd Allāh b. Sabā', one of the ringleaders be-hind the martyrdom of the Third Pious Caliph, is rather incisive. Sabā' was a Yamanite Jew who had become a convert to Islam. The author observes: "When ʻAlī was assassinated, Ibn Ḥazm quotes Ibn Sabā', the Jew, as protesting: ʻBy God, by God, we shall never believe that ʻAll died. He shall never die until he fills the world with justice as it is now filled with injustice.' It is obvious that Ibn Sabā' derived his theory of Return from Judaism. The Jews believed that Ilyās had ascended the heaven and would return one day to bring back religion and law. The same idea occurs in Christianity in its early stages. This idea has been developed by the Shīʻīs who believe in the ʻdisappearance' of the Imāms" (p. 199). The early founders of the Imāmite creed, he rightly observes, were Arabs, notably the Southern Arabs. Abū Mukhtār al-Thaqafī belonged to Ṭā'if, whereas Ṣā'ib Kalbī was a Yamanite. The Jews of Yemen were different from those of Khaybar in that they were not Israelites proper. This point has been discussed by Philby in his description of Najrān and Yemen.

A very important part of the book is the last chapter ("Con-temporary Centres of Culture"), in which is discussed the evolution of the cities of Kūfah and Baṣrah, of the Ḥijāz, Syria, and Egypt and ought to be studied by every student of Islamic history. The late Arnold J. Toynbee was right in praising it.

It is hoped Dr Afzal Iqbal would publish a third, enlarged edition of the work doing away with the constraints of space. The trouble is that the subject is one that offers too many potentialities.

There are certain misprints like bi-lanes for by-lanes which need to be corrected ;

but otherwise the quality of printing is consistently good.

—Kamal M. Hab