

ALI AHMAD BAKATHIR TRACES AN INHUMAN FACE OF TYRANNY THROUGH HIS HISTORICAL DRAMA *SIR AL-HAKIM BI-AMR ALLAH*

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Abstract:

This paper discusses tyranny, the abuse of power and religion, and loss of human values during the reign of an ancient Muslim ruler, namely, Al-Hakim bi Amr Allah (The Ruler by God's Command), the third Fatimid Caliph of Egypt (996-1021). Ali Ahmad Bakathir's Sir Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah deals with the unfair practices of this ruler over his subjects and the struggle of the people against him. He played dirty tricks of politics and religion during his reign. The paper also presents the crisis of values of this ruler who appear to be like the wild beasts killing innocent people to protect his crown. Though, this ruler belonged to the Islamic culture, which calls for justice, equality and peace; they wrecked havoc and posed to be god-like. They had established rules, contrary to the Quran and the teachings of Islam and punished people for their disobedience.

KEYWORDS:

Inhuman faces of tyranny, Abuse of Power, Abuse of Religion, Misinterpretation, Sir al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah etc.

INTRODUCTION

Plato and Aristotle define a tyrant as, "one who rules without law, looks to his own advantage rather than that of his subjects, and uses extreme and cruel tactics against his own people as well as others" (Glad, 2002). Tyranny, abuse of power and suppression during the reign of many Muslim rulers is a recurrent issue throughout history in many societies and countries. Rulers had been unjust and they had mistreated their people and practiced dirty games to control them to continue in power for the whole of their life. Some Muslim rulers have been criticized by Muslim and non-Muslim writers for their abuse of power and their tyranny. In the history of the Muslim rulers, a well-known ruler- Al-Hakim bi Amr Allah (The Ruler by God's Command) is known as dictator and mad ruler. His abuse of power and tyranny has been manifested through the play has been analyzed. The Muslim ruler, in this play, exercise his power and authority on his people and close associates and assassinate those who threaten their 'peace of mind' and those too who might be a danger for them in future.

Ali Ahmad Bakathir (1910-69), had predicted the political breakdown in the Arab world through many of his plays, considered to be a direct criticism on the Arab Muslim leaders. Bakathir's *Sir Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah* (1947), translated as *The Secret of the Ruler by God's Command*, criticizes a Muslim ruler named Abu Ali Mansur, known as Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah, whose tyranny and dictatorship exceed all the limits. He is known as a mad ruler for his esoteric opinions and beliefs. He interprets the teachings of Islam to suit his desires and proposes himself to be a deity.

The ruler in the play tends to lose his balance and integrity because of his lust for power. He is mad because power had adversely affected him, which in turn, affected the stability of the individual and the nation as well. Manser's observation is relevant in this regard: "Power has an adverse effect on the integrity

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of those in authority and the more power they have, the worse they become” (Manser, p.225). The analysis of the play I have taken shows how power had negatively affected the ruler, leading to a crisis of human values, tyranny, abuse of power and religion.

Tyranny and Abuse of Power

Ali Ahmad Bakathir's *Sir al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah* (1947) narrates a story of a tyrant who made himself another Pharaoh. The mad Fatimid ruler of Egypt, as described by his people, Al-Hakim bi Amr Allah proclaimed himself God with the help of his close associates. The play presents how people are forced to be silent and accept what is dictated to them through the agents of the ruler and through wicked means. The ruler attempts to control people and direct them as he likes. He spreads fear among his people and uses excessive power against anyone who opposes him. In this regard, it is necessary to shed light on the four dimensions a ruler relies on to remain in power for a longer time. They are the people's need, care, power and fear. Dr. Alalam points out these four dimensions and shows how the ruler and the ruled are related, which is true of Al-Hakim:

Generally, we can distinguish between four dimensions which control this kind of relationship [between the ruler and his subjects]. The first one is need, which involves dependence and the seeker's need for what wished for, like the need of the body for the soul, the earth for the water and the patient for the doctor. The second one is care which involves leniency, beneficence and guidance, like the shepherd with his herd, the father with his son and the guardian with his orphan. The third one is power which imposes others to fear and get crushed before a person who is like the sea with much water but very deep, like the sun and fire which may give warm but they may burn, ... The fourth one is fear which involves cautiousness and keeping distance. Fear does not only result out of assault and power, but results out of the difficulty to predict the Caliph's behavior, for he resembles a child whose actions are unpredictable (p. 187).

Al-Hakim has established his relation with his subjects on the basis of those four dimensions. The people's need for the Caliph, the first dimension, has made them submissive, carrying out all his orders. He controls all the resources of the Kingdom and distributes them to his close associates to make the circle around him durable. He attempts to weaken his subjects through need and poverty and creates disputes and conflict among them. For example, when a group of people approaches him for assistance, he agrees on the condition that they first join a fighting contest and the winner will get the gold pieces. He imposes many things on his people so that they always remain in need for his assistance. Care, the second dimension, does not exist during the reign of this ruler. It increased the gap between the ruler and his subjects. If it existed, the other three dimensions of need fear and power would have disappeared. Power, of course, is important on the part of the ruler to establish security and balance in the society, but absolute power is the one which people do not like because it corrupts absolutely. During the reign of Al-Hakim, care does not exist. If it appears to exist, it is to achieve a whim of a ruler and it goes against the desires of the subjects.

The other two dimensions of power and fear exist strongly in the play, which make the ruler believe that his people will remain meek and under control as long as he defends the above dimensions. They are manifested through many incidents in the course of the play. During his reign, Al-Hakim punishes wrong doers without bothering about Allah's orders. He establishes his rules and imposes them on his people. He brutally murders innocent people to satisfy his whims and sends his secret agents to spy on.

Misinterpretation and Abuse of Religion

Misinterpretation and appropriation of Islam is crucial issues that come under the dictatorship of Al-Hakim. Religion is known as the opium of nations and plays an important role in the stability of a country and in the life of people. It is used by states, rulers or religious scholars to gain certain advantages. Religion cannot be separated from politics and vice versa. In this play, religion is appropriated and used by the Caliph to crush his opponents and it is used by the opposing party to take revenge on the Caliph for his injustice, dictatorship and for his abuse of religion and abuse of power.

Bakathir reflects on this crucial subject of religion. This outsider view about the status quo of a Muslim ruler and his subjects has a relevance to our times in which many nations have revolted against their rulers in many Arab countries. The writer must have seen or read about the dictatorship of some rulers, and therefore, has gone to the past to point out to his audience the practice of the unjust Caliph. He points out that there is no difference between the present rulers of his times and those of the ancient ones. In the play, the writer reveals the conflict between politics and religion represented respectively by the Caliph and the Hamza. The dialogue between them on this issue reveals a lot about the Caliph's politics against Islam and eminent Muslim scholars. As an attempt to soothe the Hamza, who is willing to go to speak to people to defend Islam, the Caliph admits that he is never consciously against the tenets of Islam.

Al-Hakim's speech below manifests his false perception of religion:

Al-Hakim: Oh Allah! These people don't understand the wisdom behind my rules. How can they understand the wisdom behind Your rules? Lord! They are all angry with me. If You are happy with me, I don't care (with them).

(His eyes full with tears). My lord, I don't see You are angry with me because I have violated some rules of Your Book, for I want to reform what I can. You have forbidden adultery and I exterminated it by compelling women to stay at home. You have forbidden wine and I eradicated it by uprooting the grapevines. You have forbidden theft and robbing and I put an end to it by prohibiting people from going out at night. (Bakathir, p. 30)

Al-Hakim distorts the image of Islam and destroys his society by taking up extreme steps. Firstly, he forces woman to stay at home to fight adultery. Secondly, he eradicates grapevine to stop wine production. Thirdly, he prohibits people from going out at night to stop theft. These odd steps contradict the teachings of Islam as laid down in the Holy Quran and Sunnah. His weird philosophy in establishing security and Allah's commands is also clear through the following dialogue with his sister Settul-Mulk:

Al-Hakim: I kill those leaders because I love them and that their deeds won't be thwarted if they live afterwards. ... (Bakathir, p. 24)

Settul-Mulk: I can't understand what you say. The policy you are following angered and provoked people and made them wish the downfall of our throne.

Al-Hakim: (Laughing). You have no idea about the natures of people. They only surrender to the one whom they fear and that their fear is the source of security and harmony in our country ... (Bakathir, p. 25)

Al-Hakim forces his people to submit and surrender to him. He feels that they know what is right for their people and they think that they can do better without the instructions of the Quran.

Crisis of Human Values

Crises of human values and degradation are miserable aspects during the journey which is imposed on the people. Al-Hakim goes a step beyond to get rid of his human weakness by killing an innocent child to satisfy his whim. He goes on contemplating on the organs of the child's body and describes how Allah has created them. He holds the heart, the liver, the lungs ... etc and asks: "where is that vibrant life? Where is that beauty? All have gone. ... Here I have got rid of Mercy. I have got rid of the human weakness" (Bakathir, p. 18). This lust for blood goes on. Another example of his crime is that he cuts off the tongue of a man who has been heard speaking to his wife at bedtime about the ruler. One of the spies reported to the king that one man had been praying to Allah to save this country from this tyrant. The man is shocked to hear this news because no one else was there except his wife. With such kind of practice, he forces people to keep silence and dare not speak a single word against him.

Al-Hakim's contradictory personality is clear in his actions, judgments and in his words. He sometimes praises knowledge and scholars and builds schools for them, and he sometimes destroys the schools over their heads. He wears woollen clothes and sits in darkness for many years to practice his favorite sport which he believes will help him get rid of the human weakness to be godlike. He abolishes Zakat, prevents Duha prayer, Taraweeh and Pilgrimage, and orders people to close shops at daytime and opens them at night. His contradictions have extended to the People of the Book as well. He orders the demolition of the Resurrection Church in Jerusalem and forces the Jews and Christians to embrace Islam or leave the country. Al-Hakim's contradictory orders are meant to test the people's loyalty and willingness to obey him. When he notices their submission and obedience, he asks them to worship him. For this purpose, he establishes a centre called the *House of Wisdom* for preparing and guiding Ismailia advocates. Then, he orders people to stand and kneel down when the Imam mentions his name during the sermons as a kind of glorification for him. There are many events in the play which prove Al-Hakim's contradictory nature. He worships Allah seeking his guidance, but he does horrible deeds that a normal man cannot approve of. The story of his maids who beg him to spare their lives shows how inhuman and foolish Al-Hakim is. The reason behind his decision to get rid of them is to stop them from marrying other men and that they are considered to be a temptation. He speaks to Allah that he has got rid of this temptation (Bakathir, p. 49), which he thinks to be a victory over human desires and a step to reach his goal. Al-Hakim attempts to settle issues and claims to do justice to his people.

But Al-Hakim proves to be weirder and more eccentric. Al-Hakim orders women to stay at home and gives them consents on specific days if they want to go out. One of his people, namely Sayed, uses this order to his advantage and does not give the consent letter to his sister at a suitable time to deprive her of a chance to see her mother in her death bed. Therefore, Sayed has taken all the possessions and the money of his mother depriving his sister of her rights. Al-Hakim confiscates all Sayed's money. When Sayed begs Al-Hakim to have mercy on him, he orders to kill him and to give one third of the property to his sister and two

ALI AHMAD BAKATHIR TRACES AN INHUMAN FACE OF TYRANNY THROUGH HIS HISTORICAL....

thirds to his wife and children.

Another example of Al-Hakim's weird judgment and dehumanisation is when ten needy people approach him for his assistance he asks them to be divided into two groups and fight each other and the winner will win the five gold coins. They kill each other in the fighting contest except one who is supposed to get the gold. Al-Hakim does not approve of it and does not fulfill his promise. He orders his men to kill the winner because he has killed his brothers for the sake of gold. The men hit the winner with the gold pieces till he dies.

CONCLUSION

Thomas Smith's argues, as pointed out by Mary Nyquist, that "Absolute power is dangerous to those ruled and to the ruler, who is likely to become insolently swollen with pride" (Nyquist, p. 85). Al-Hakim became swollen with pride and did not realize that power alone is not an active mean to keep the kingdom or the country stable. A ruler has to win the hearts of his subjects by doing justice, and by extending good manners, care and love. It is also important that the ruler should not care for the inner thoughts of his subjects and what they think about him. That will not lead to any positive stability in the nation. The moment ruler began to suspect his subjects, imbalance and violence begin to emerge. With thoughts of doubts in mind, Al-Hakim begins to crush their subjects the moment they sense danger approaching them. That Al-Hakim cuts off the tongue of one of the people who is heard at night talking ill of him testifies this. He does this by sending spies at night to listen to what people say about him. Therefore, the power of the ruler should be balanced and accompanied by justice and care and to be based on good terms with his subjects if he wants them to be active participants in establishing security and stability. It is true that the ruler had lusted for power "to satisfy vicious and cruel appetite, without respect of God, of right or of the law".

Al-Hakim misrepresented Islam and its teachings to suit his whims. He was tyrants and unjust towards their families and their people as well. They killed innocent people, imprisoned, and exiled Hamzas. He abused religion and used it to his advantage to crush his opponents to stay in power as long as possible.

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