

# Intertextual Reflections on Nature and Solitude in Alexander Pope's "Ode on Solitude": An Islamic Perspective

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**Abstract** Many a great well-known English writer has drawn on Arabic culture. Unfortunately, those writers have not acknowledged such a cross-cultural interaction, which has been tackled by few studies. It is surprising that writers in the field have left out of their account Arabic and Islamic echoes in the poetry of Alexander Pope. This paper argues that an intertextual reading of Pope's "Ode on Solitude" uncovers a possible affinity between Pope and Islamic culture in terms of the relationship between nature, happiness, and solitude. This paper argues that Pope's "Ode on Solitude" restructures, appropriates, and even (in some cases) translates some *Quranic* verses and the *Hadith*. This paper moreover suggests that a hypertextual relationship between Pope's poem and Islam can be obviously detected.

**Key words** Solitude; Intertextuality; the *Quran*; *Hadith*; Nature

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Many a great well-known English writer has drawn on Arabic culture. Unfortunately, those writers have not acknowledged such a cross-cultural interaction, which has been tackled by few studies. For instance, Al-Garrallah (15-41) argues that Wilfred Scawen Blunt appropriates and even translates the story of Abu Zaid Al-Hilali, who is a famous Arab legendary figure celebrated in folklore, where many stories are woven around him. In the same vein, Al-Garrallah (1-13, 101-121) unravels specific Oriental echoes in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and sonnets. He argues that Shakespeare is surprisingly touched by *the Quran*, *the Arabian Nights*, and the poetry of Antara bin Shaddad. Similarly, Al-Garrallah (75-86) explains how James Elroy Flecker appropriates and even translates the poetry of Antara bin Shaddad. Furthermore, Al-Garrallah (671-686) explores some striking similarities between Chaucer's *The Merchant's Tale* and seven Arabic short stories. Al-Garrallah (528-547, 160-177, 69-85) suggests that Rudyard Kipling's poetry and stories are rife with elements taken from the *Quran* and the *Arabian Nights*. Furthermore, Al-Garrallah (524-547) explains how English poets appropriate Islamic versions of the story of Solomon and the angel of death. In continuing Al-Garrallah's efforts in unravelling the unacknowledged influence of Arabic culture in English literature, this paper argues that Alexander Pope might have been aware of the *Quran* and *Hadith*.<sup>1</sup>

It is surprising that writers in the field have left out of their account Arabic and Islamic echoes in the poetry of Pope. Critics, however, pay attention to Pope's preoccupations with Islam and Arabs. For instance, Al-Rodhan (122) suggests that Pope read Arabic texts such as *Hay bin Yagthan*. Similarly, in 1716, in a letter addressed to Lady Montague, Pope admits his awareness of Islam (Garcia 61). In the same context, Alexander Pope was introduced to Turkish poetry by Lady Mary (Lewis 30). Therefore, the main aim of this paper is to explore how Pope's "Ode on Solitude" *intertexts* (so to speak) with the *Quran* and *Hadith*.

Alexander Pope (1688-1744) wrote "Ode on Solitude" when he was twelve years old. Meanwhile, his family left London to Binfield due to catholic beliefs (Rogers 23). Although this poem is anthologized, it is not examined by Pope's critics. However, in "The Happy Man and the Cultural Fable of the Good Life," Brown (103) directs readers' attention to the significance of Pope's poem. She compares Aristotle's philosophy of good life with the concept's pervasiveness in the imagination of 18<sup>th</sup> century's culture. She elaborates on the concept of good life and happiness in 18<sup>th</sup> century poems — among which are Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," Alexander Pope's "Ode on Solitude," and Oliver

1 Israr Ahmad Khan mentions that "the *Hadith* consist of reports containing information about the Prophet Mohammad's sayings, deeds, decisions, and tacit approvals" (28).

Goldsmith's "The Deserted Village." Brown (103) argues that the concept of the "happy man" might be a precursor and an early version of its development as a cultural fable of happiness and "good life" of U.S. modern thought in the postwar period. Brown explains that "good life" and "happiness" are linked primarily to material culture and postwar economic expansion and is also seen as an "imaginative reflection upon or negotiation with contemporary historical forces." Thus, these imaginative and cultural constructs, which echo modern life, are found in the eighteenth century's culture which was preoccupied deeply with happiness.

What Brown is seemingly unaware of is Pope's poem's similarity with the *Quran* and *Hadith*. In bridging such a lacuna, this paper argues that an intertextual reading of Pope's "Ode on Solitude" uncovers a possible affinity between Pope and Islamic culture in terms of the relationship between nature, happiness, and solitude. This paper argues that Pope's "Ode on Solitude" restructures, appropriates, and even (in some cases) translates some *Quranic* verses and *Hadith*. In so doing, the paper considers a textual analysis of Pope's poem in order to analyze its preoccupations and connections with Islamic religious texts. Bliss and solace of solitude, the virtuousness of isolation, embracing the simplicity of countrified life of shepherds and sheep — these are some themes that the poem and the *Quran* and *Hadith* deal similarly with.

Those striking similarities indicate Pope's possible familiarity with Islam. These intertextual links between Pope's poem and the *Quran* and *Hadith* can be better analyzed within Genette's concepts of intertextuality and hypertextuality (Genette 1-2). Pope's poem's echoes in those texts are exemplary of Genette's theory of transtextuality as "textual transcendence of the text" (Genette 1). In Genette's terms, transtextuality is "all that sets the text in relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts" and it "covers all aspects of a particular text" (Genette 83-84). Pope's poem is a particularly illuminating choice to illustrate transtextuality bearing in mind the striking parallels between the poem and Islamic sources. In the poem, interlaced lines from the *Quran* and *Hadith* are a deliberate and significant feature of Genette's intertextuality. The poem does not only allude to earlier texts, but is also derived from the *Quran* and *Hadith* through transformations that Genette delineates in depth. "Ode on Solitude" is a hypertext for some Islamic hypotexts.

Brown (104) argues that the modern and postwar ideology of happiness and good life is influenced and shaped by eighteenth-century's imagination and informed by the poetic trope of the "happy man" that is seen as an "early version of modern happiness-invention." This tradition of the happy man, found in Pope's

“Ode on Solitude,” which demonstrates the notion of “individualism and denial of process,” is traced back to the Horatian tradition as well as seventeenth century’s classical formulations, and influential evocations of this literary tradition. Thus, Pope’s imaginative vision is evocative of the “Aristotelian trope of contemplation” (Brown 106). These ideas, according to Brown, develop from earlier versions of the happiness tradition found in Andrew Marvell’s literary imagination. Pope’s concept of happiness, Brown (106) writes, is allegedly associated with “a specific anti-urban and proprietary venue—the ‘paternal acres’ —and a strong denial of commodification through a claim of rural self-sufficiency.” Brown (107) concludes that eighteenth-century fantasies of the happy man and the twentieth-century figure of good life participate in the same long-lived cultural fable. The notion of happiness generated in both eras is specifically and entirely related to significant advancements in economy. In this vein, the eighteenth century’s fantasized version of happiness is susceptible to the transformational impact of revolution at the turn of the nineteenth century (Brown 108).

Apart from Brown’s thesis, this paper suggests that a hypertextual relationship between Pope’s poem and Islam can be obviously detected. This is apparently shown by the presence of some Islamic echoes of the *Quran* and *Hadith* (as the hypotexts) which are united with Pope’s poem which is the hypertext. In particular, one might suggest that Pope draws on the Islamic idea of solitude and nature represented in those hypotexts. The poem’s hypertextuality derives from Islamic faith through transformation that Genette delineates in depth. Genette’s hypertextuality includes “any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the *hypertext*) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the *hypotext*), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary” (Genette 5). In other words, Genette’s thesis is to explain how a text draws on other texts through restructuring, modification, and translation. Moreover, *intertextuality*, according to Genette, considers a relationship of co-presence between two texts or among several texts: [...] typically as the actual presence of one text within another. In its most explicit and literal form, it is the traditional practice of *quoting* [...] In another less explicit and canonical form, it is the practice of *plagiarism* [...] Again, [...] it is the practice of *allusion*. Allusions may be conscious or unconscious; or, better, attestable or not. Quotation may be implicit or explicit; intentional or incidental; marked or unmarked (Genette 1-2).

In many different ways, it can be said that Pope’s hypertext becomes the “site for the dialogue between ... occidental and oriental [discourses]” (Kundu viii). From an intertextual perspective, it can be argued that Pope’s poem offers deep insights into what might be called the bliss of solitude, which is similarly a core

Islamic notion. There are some parallels and semblances between the hypertext and its hypotexts in their ways of describing and celebrating the peaceful and happy life of shepherds. Their portrayals of the virtuousness and solitude are strikingly similar: both romantically celebrate simplicity and peaceful serenity of the countrified life.

To recap, Pope's idea of solitude is linked intertextually with solitude in the *Quran* and *Hadith* in terms of diction. To begin with, it is obvious that Pope's title, "Ode on Solitude," introduces the term (solitude) to the reader, implying that the whole cycle of the poem revolves around it. The phrase (ode on solitude) establishes a strong relationship between solitude, human bliss, and solace. When Pope wrote his ode, he was certainly aware of the idea of solitude as an important thing to attain especially in times of upheavals. The poem introduces an unknown, lonely man, who catches a strong sense of happiness as a result of being cut off from society. Pope's concept of solitude is linked to social solitude. The real bliss, referred to in the opening line and the first word (happy) is to be in social solitude. Pope's version of blissful solitude is an echo of the trope of solitude found in *Hadith*. The *Hadith* celebrate the importance of solitude in an escape from seditions and social ills. In other words, one can enjoy a happy life by recoiling from people, abstaining from marriage and children, and owning a land, camels, and sheep. Whether consciously or not, Pope alludes to the theme of the virtuousness and solace of seclusion narrated in *Hadith*. There are inextricable links between Pope's poem and the discourse of solitude in *Hadith*. In both contexts, the theme of man's solitude in nature is seen to be a necessity particularly at times of turbulences and seditions. In an Islamic context, one should not avoid what Al-Bukhari narrated. He narrated that Mohammed said "Soon the best wealth of a Muslim will be the sheep which he can follow in the peaks of mountains and places where rain falls to be found, fleeing with his religion from seditions."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Abu Hurairah narrated that Mohammed (pbuh) encouraged Muslims during seditions to eat and drink from (the milk of) their sheep which they keep in the tops of mountains. He narrated that Mohammed (pbuh) said: "There will be seditions come to you under the cover of dark night. Will survive these seditions a man who keeps in the top of a mountain eats from his sheep or a man behind the paths who rides his horse and eats from his sword."<sup>2</sup> This suggests that an escape to nature is highly encouraged in Islam during upheavals and seditions.

1 This *Hadith* is narrated by Muhammed Ibn Ismaiel Al-Bukhari. *Sahih Al-Bukhari. The Book of Faith (Kitab Al-Iman)*, (Cairo: Dar Al-Shaab, 1987), Vol. 1, *Hadith* Number 19, p.13. [Translation is ours].

2 This *Hadith* appears in *Al-Mustadrak 'Ala al-Sahihain* by Al-Hakim Al-Naisaburi. *The Book of Al-Fitan Wa Al-Malahim (Kitab Al-Fitan wa Al-Malahim)*, (Beirut: Dar al kotob al ilmiyah, 1990), Vol. 2, *Hadith* Number 2460, p. 102. [Translation is ours].

Muslims are encouraged to seek solitude at times of extreme sedition where right and wrong are difficult to distinguish, or if being among others would weaken their faith or subject them to temptations that they cannot resist. A Muslim can run away from people to nature in case he wants to keep his faith in Allah unshakable and avoid temptations. It can be inferred that society can be a very effective means of corruption and so the solution is to cut off from society. It is definitely worth noting, as narrated in the prophetic *Hadith*, that mountains' peaks, Muslims should resort to at turbulent times, do not simply refer to high places as the word "peak" is used in its literal sense. Instead, "peak" suggests a place where one can seek isolation and solitude, and, thus, makes implications about the benevolence of solitude.

In addition, it is narrated that Mohammed (pbuh) urged people to recoil from people during times of turbulences and follow their camels, sheep, or land especially in avoidance of probable fight. It is narrated that Mohammed (pbuh) said: "There will be seditions (*fitnah*) [...]. Therefore, those who have camels are to follow their camels; those who have sheep are to follow their sheep and those who have land are to follow their land".<sup>1</sup> It is, therefore, possible to suggest that seclusion is asserted upon in Islam as being righteous, especially in avoidance of probable tribulations.

This is similar to what Pope experienced as he belonged to a Catholic family who fled and lived in the rural area of Binfield when Catholics were persecuted at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Rogers 23). This poem might be a response to this harsh experience. If so, the poem's intended meaning might be to highlight the significance of recoiling from people if one searches for happiness and immunity from corruption. In other words, what man needs in such a situation is to inherit "[a] few paternal acres" in order to run his own farm, which becomes his own utopia. In this way, it is possible to suggest that Pope's point is to draw attention to man's self-sufficiency and the legal source of his land as well. In other words, this man is utterly cut off from people, who do not even play any part in his gaining the inheritance. He is the master of his own farm.

It seems that Pope's intention is to emphasise that a mystic man needs to catch a strong sense of harmony with nature which replaces society. Pope draws nature as superior to society. It is nature that strengthens man's sense of self-sufficiency, purity, happiness, and solitude in many different ways. It meets his physical and spiritual needs. It is the source of his food, drinks, clothes, warmth, fire, medicine, serenity, health, and stability. Consider the second stanza, which surprisingly echoes

1 This *Hadith* appears in Muslim Ibn al-Hajjaj's *Sahih Muslim*. The Book pertaining to the turmoil and potents of the last hour (*Kitab Al-Fitan wa Ashrat As-Sa'ah*), (Cairo: Maktabat Al-Iman, n.d.), Vol. 1, *Hadith* Number 2887, p. 1424. [Translation is ours].

*The Quran:*

Whose herds with milk, whose fields with bread,  
 Whose flocks supply him with attire,  
 Whose trees in summer yield him shade,  
 In winter fire.

It is notable that Pope's reliance on nature in this simple way has *Quranic* echoes. More importantly, in the *Quran*, there are some verses reminiscent strikingly of Pope's second stanza. In *Surah* (16) "An-Nahl," Allah says,

And verily, in the cattle, there is a lesson for you. We give you to drink of that which is in their bellies, from between excretions and blood, pure milk; palatable to the drinkers." (66) [...] "And Allah has made for you in your homes an abode, and made for you out of the hides of the cattle (tents for) dwelling, which you find so light (and handy) when you travel and when you stay (in your travels); and of their wool, fur, and hair (sheep wool, camel fur, and goat hair), furnishings and articles of convenience (e.g. carpets, blankets), comfort for a while" (80). "And Allah has made for you out of that which He has created shades, and has made for places of refuge in the mountains, and has made for you garments to protect you from the heat (and cold), and coats of mail to protect you from your (mutual) violence. Thus does He perfect His Favour to you, that you may submit yourselves to His Will (in Islam) (81)

Similarly, in *Surah* (36) "Ya-Sin," Allah says,

And We have subdued them to them so that some of them they have for riding and some they eat." (72)"And they have (other) benefits from them, and they get (milk) to drink. Will they not then be grateful?" (73) [...] "He Who produces for you fire out of the green tree, when behold! you kindle therewith. (80)

It is of great significance to note that some examples of Genette's paratextuality are Pope's allusions to cattle, milk, shelter, and fire (to name but some) in both texts. One might suggest that those allusions in the second stanza might be obviously manifested translations of the *Quranic* verses mentioned above. In addition, those references in the poem are the dominant peritexts. Pope's reference to cattle as a source of both nourishment and shelter provides an example of a peritext that un-

ravels and echoes the poem's remarkable adaptation of the *Quranic* meaning. Considering this peritext, Pope obviously reproduces the beneficial effects of cattle both for nourishment and protective covering as referred to in the *Quran*. Another example of Genette's paratextuality is the allusion to the advantageous quality of fire in both texts. The fire exemplifies another key peritext. In summer's time, Pope's speaker turns to his trees to provide him with enough "shade" and in winter to keep him warm through kindling fire. Similarly, man in the *Quranic* verses is grateful for the beneficial quality of fire instigated from the green tree. Both texts depict man's reliance on nature as a source of self-sufficient living and nothing beyond as one's needs cannot actually exceed such needs. This satisfaction and stability in living, suggested in both texts, fulfills the happiness of the individual while embracing the simplicity of nature and countrified life. However, one might add that those *Quranic* verses underscore how Allah makes nature for the benefit of man in many different ways. Like Pope's speaker, who relies on his own farm for his food, drinks, clothes, shelter, among many other things, man in the *Quranic* verses can get many things from his cattle and trees. In those *Quranic* verses, all those graces must remind man of Allah as the Creator, who must be worshipped. In other words, nature is a sign of Allah's might. However, Pope's speaker does not even refer to God, who must be worshipped for creating this nature.

Pope's portrayal of the speaker's farm and his simple lifestyle, in the second stanza, is fascinating. Thus, the move to the third and fourth stanzas becomes unsurprisingly smooth. Consider the following stanzas:

Blest! who can unconcern'dly find  
Hours, days, and years slide soft away,  
In health of body, peace of mind,  
Quiet by day,

Sound sleep by night; study and ease  
Together mix'd; sweet recreation,  
And innocence, which most does please,  
With meditation.

The speaker's farm, in enhancing the speaker's self-sufficiency and loneliness, becomes the source of the speaker's solace, serenity, health, innocence, and above all, blessing. The speaker's loss of the meaningless passage of time is of great significance. The speaker becomes immune from social worries, so he is unaware of time;

he becomes healthy, peaceful, and quiet; he enjoys sleeping at night without nightmares. Time passes quickly and quietly because he is very happy. This feeling of extreme happiness is yielded by the blissful solitude he lives and the real meditation he experiences.

Pope's explicit idea in the third and fourth stanzas is likewise emphasised by Mohammed (pbuh). It is narrated that Mohammed mentioned that "if a person wakes up in the morning finding himself fearless from enemies, peaceful, healthy in body, and having enough daily nourishment, it is as if this person were graced the whole world."<sup>1</sup> The point here is that a person can evaluate his happiness in accordance with some standards related to fearlessness, psychological and physical health in body, and absence of hunger and thirst. What a person needs to do in such a situation is to experience meditation. This is suggested by Islamic faith and Pope. Both suggest a taste for solitude and a peaceful state of mind. Pope's verse translates the Islamic faith of the concept of solitude as well as the meditative nature of it which suggests the poet's potential knowledge of Islam. Meditative and reflective associations of solitude are at the heart of Islamic faith and practice of religion. In Islam, the practice of solitude and meditation is of great significance and forms a large part of daily prayers. During prayers, Muslims are supposed to focus profoundly and meditatively on Allah. It is worth noting that this simple and happy lifestyle does not mean that the speaker, who recoils from society, is naïve or unsophisticated. This is, however, a different story. His farm becomes a locus of the speaker's reflection, meditation, spiritual belief, and purity. Pope's point, in this context, perhaps is that the notion of solitude as a meditative experience is pleasing and creative. Solitude, silence, and studious meditation, he underscores, help a person achieve serenity, innocence, and purity

The speaker explicitly emphasises the idea of solitude in his life: he is determined that this solitude must endure forever (even after his death). He wants to leave this world lonely. He does not want anybody to lament him and even to know where his tomb lies. He does not want a stone to disturb his solitude:

Thus let me live, unseen, unknown;  
 Thus unlamented let me die;  
 Steal from the world, and not a stone  
 Tell where I lie.

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1 This *Hadith* appears in *Sunan al-Tirmidhi* by Muhammad E. al-Tirmidhi. *The Book of Zuhd (Kitab Al-Zuhd)*, Vol. 4, *Hadith* Number 2346, p. 574. (Beirut: Dar Ihya al-Turath al-Arabi, n.d.). [Translation is ours].

In this last quatrain, Pope concludes his poem with how his speaker wants to continue and end his life. Apparently, the speaker's solitude becomes immortal *par excellence* in that it goes on after his death. The speaker is stably aware that his social invisibility is the source of his invincibility. Therefore, he emphasises that his life and death must unsurprisingly share seclusion. He lives alone; he wants to die alone. In this version of death, Pope, nevertheless, diverges from Islam through modifying the Islamic attitude towards death and funerals. Islam encourages Muslims to participate in funerals and to put a stone on the tomb so that Muslims can recognise the tomb easily and some of the dead's relatives might be buried in the same grave.

By way of concluding, it is surprising that writers in the field have left out of their account Arabic and Islamic influences in the poetry of Alexander Pope. An intertextual reading of Pope's "Ode on Solitude" uncovers a possible affinity between Pope and Islamic culture in terms of the relationship between nature, happiness, and solitude. This paper argues that Alexander Pope's "Ode on Solitude" restructures, appropriates, and even (in some cases) translates some *Quranic* verses and *Hadith*. This is apparently shown by the presence of some Islamic echoes of the *Quran* and *Hadith* (as the hypotexts) which are united with Pope's poem as the hypertext. The paper, finally, suggests that nobody can deny the parallels between the hypertext and its hypotexts-- not the least of which is celebration of the peaceful and happy life of shepherds.

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