

Uniformity of Theme and Structure of Pre-Islamic Odes

Dr. Mohd. Azam

Assistant Prof. Deptt. Of Arabic, BGSB University,
Rajouri. Jammu and Kashmir

Abstract—Arabic literary tradition is the popular one in all over the world that is why it is known as classical language among all living languages of the earth so, it is widely written, I tried my best to express some basic facts closely connected to the pre-Islamic Odes of Arabic literature to put in front of the readers in brief.

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Introduction

The general similarity in structure and content of the pre-Islamic odes may give, especially when they are read in translation, an impression of monotony, almost of bareness, mirroring with a certain rude force the uniformity of desert life, its concreteness, realism, absence of shading and of introspection. Where the poet is held almost wholly to specific themes, and his aim is to decorate and embellish those themes with all the art at his command, to surpass his predecessors and rivals in beauty, expressiveness, terseness of phrase, in fidelity of description and grasp of reality, then such poetry can never be satisfactorily translated into any other language, just because the thing said varies so little and the whole art lies in the untranslatable manner of saying it.

But it would be utterly wrong to leave the impression that all the poets followed the same mould or reserved their powers solely for panegyrics. One need not look further than the famous collection called the Mu'allqaat, which literary means "suspended Odes/ hanged Odes", has not yet been satisfactorily explained. A story of later concoction asserts that they were the winning poems at poetic tournaments held at the fair of "Ukaz" transcribed in gold and hung up in the Kaba at Makkah. It is an anthology of seven 'golden Odes' made by a "raawee" of the eighth century, to which three other odes are commonly appended. The ten poems are by as many hands, the masters of pre-Islamic poetry, and each is regarded as its author's masterpiece.

Concrete themes of the ignorant poets

Zuhair inbne Abi sulma: Even we did not find any two of them are alike, and only one is an outright panegyric, that of

Zuhair, most of whose "deewaan"(collected poetical works) is devoted to the praises of two chief for composing a fratricidal feud, and who, with the wisdom of age, stands out as the mouth-piece of the pessimistic ethics of the desert.

Nabigha al-zubyaani: his mu'allaqah is a kind of half-defiant apology mingled with panegyric addressed to the king of the Arab state of Hira on the Euphrates of whom he was almost the court-poet the example of this practice in Arabic literature is very common since beginning till date.

Amar ibn-e kulthum: is addressed to an earlier king of Hira by poets of rival tribal groups. Who is the spokesman of the tribe of Taghlib, who ranged the north-eastern quarter of the Syrian desert, presents anything but a panegyric; rather it is one of the most uncompromising expressions of tribal pride and defiance: With what intent, O 'Amar son of Hind, do you scorn us,

And follow the whim of those who embroider against us?

With what intent, O 'Amar son of Hind, are we to be made

Domestics under the thumb of your little kinglet?

Be sparing in menace, go gently with threats against us-

Our spearshafts, O 'Amar, are tough, and have foiled the efforts

Of enemies ere your time to cause them to bend.

And ends with an extravagant climax of boasts:

To us belongs the earth and all who dwell thereon;

When we despoil, resistless is our swoop...

The mainland grows too narrow for our swelling hosts,

The sea is ours, we fill it with our ships.

Al-Harith ibn Hilliza: the opponent of "kulthum" is the spokesman of the tribe of Bakar on the lower Euphrates, his poem is a rather less successful combination of boasting and satire, and patronizingly panegyric towards King 'Amar bin Hind.

Imra-ul-Qais: the muallaqah of imra-ul-qais is fully the construction of self-praise; it is according to the opinion of many critics. It dissolute and exiled son of the ruler of a precarious north-Arabian kingdom, and leader of the poets to hell-fire in the eyes of early Muslim Puritanism. His poem is entirely self-centered, and noted for its natural descriptions, including a fine picture of a thunderstorm, as well as for the frankness of his amatory passages.

Antara bin Shaddad: The self-centeredness is found in the poems of 'Antra, also who is a slave-born hero of the tribe of "Abas" and the Bakrite Tarafa, the former vaunting his prowess in the battlefield, the latter chiefly concerned with the fine points of his she-camel and his prowess in the tavern.

Tarfah bin-al-abd: he is the former vaunting his prowess in the battlefield, the peculiarity of the poem of Tarfa is also self-centeredness. Tarfa chiefly concerned with the fine points of his she-camel and his prowess in the tavern.

Labid bin Abi rabeeh: is a professional troubadours belonging to the last generation of pre-Islamic poets, and seem already to show signs of the growing standardization of technique and themes. He specializes in scenes of animal life.

Al-Ashaa: is a professional troubadour well versed in depicting of egoism, belonging to the last generation of pre-Islamic poets. He specializes in reminiscences of love and drinking, leading ultimately in both to boasting of their own exploits and that of their tribes, or to panegyric.

Altogether some hundreds of "Qaseedaas" Odes of pre-Islamic age have come down to us, more or less authenticated to some extent. In addition to the "deewaans" collected poetic work of ten poets of the "Mu-alla-qaat" and of several others who have put their endivours in this field, there is another collection which is very close and contemporary with the "Mu-alla-qaat" and named after its compiler who was a famous philologist al-Mufaddal-al-dhabbi the "Mufaddaliyaat", contains some one hundred twenty odes and fragments, chiefly from lesser pre-Islamic poets, and there are several other collections of less celebrity. But it would be mistake to confine our attention exclusively to "Qaseedaas". Although the ode represents the culmination of the poetic art in Arabia, it by no means constituted the great part of its poetic production. Alongside it there existed a vast output of shorter poems, elegies, impromptus, &c., which, less convention-bound than the "Qaseedaa" must also enter into any reckoning of the measure and quality of the poetic genius of the Arabs.

Anthologies after eighth century:

Most of these have come down in anthologies of excerpts and occasional pieces in the field of poetry whether these were general or particular, the most famous of them, "Deewaanul-Hamaasah" (poems of Bravery and boldness), compiled by "Abu Tamam" himself a poet of note in the ninth century. The

collection is divided into ten sections, the first and longest of which has given its name to the work.

Another anthology bearing the same title was made by the poet Al-Buhtari just some years later. Many excerpts from the ancient poems are contained also in the "Kitabul-Aghaani" (book of songs) of "Abul-Faraj Al-Asfahani" a valuable collection in twenty volumes of biographies of poets and musicians, from which most of our knowledge of ancient Arabian society and manners is drawn, and in numerous works of philology and belles-letters. No one who reads the poems preserved in "Deewaanul-Hamaasah" of Abu Tamam will deny that here is an art, springing out of natural feeling and popular consciousness, and expressing with vigor, with a certain wild beauty, and often with a strangely moving power, the personality of the poets and the conceptions and ideals of their age.

Richness of the ode "Qaseedah":

If we go through the realm of classical poetry it gives a brief sketch of that era and what poetical atmosphere the ode created for us is its universal imprint of the mind of the great personalities of ignorant age. It is not easy to give a clear and definite answer about the word bank of their poetry or the meaning which has been conveyed to us, but it is definite to write what has been collected, compiled and transferred to all comers. a modern Arabic critic has said for its own people in its own time that it satisfied its hearers because it expressed their own passion and emotions and portrayed their lives as individuals and as a society forcefully and truthfully. But its appeal lies far more in the fact that, in holding the mirror up to life, it presented an image larger than life. The passions and emotions and portrayals were idealized in content and expression-in content because it presented the Arabs to themselves as they would have liked to be immeasurably bold, gallant and openhanded, and in expression because these ideal images were clothed in rich, sonorous and evocative language and given emotional intensity by the beating rhythms and ever-recurring rhyme.

Yet to emphasize exclusively the linguistic artistry of the poet and the realism and naturalism of his subjects, however elevated and decoration, is to miss one essential element of his craft. All of these sub served his main purpose so, to stimulate the imaginative response of his audience that the poem become a dialogue between them, a dialogue in which the audience are alert to grasp the hints and allusion compressed within the compass of his verse and to complete his portrait or thought for themselves. Thus, no line of panegyric in pre-Islamic poetry is more celebrated than one of Naabighah in praise of the Ghassaanid princes of Transjordan it indicated as follows:

No fault in them but that their sword-blades

Are notched from beating on the mailed squadrons.

Or again when, in a different mode, he praises his patron, the king of Hira:

No not Euphrates itself with its crests in flood,
As its foaming breakers cover its bank with spume, and every clamorous torrent gushes to join it,
Bearing its wrack of herbage and splintered boughs,
While the frightened sailor clings to his rudder-oar,
Spent with fatigue yet straining to hold his course,
Can outdo in abundance his unmeasured bounty,
Nor does his gift today stand in the way of tomorrow.
This is realism with a difference.

Common incidents and aspirations of Qaseedah:

In that heightening of the reality that idealizing of the common incidents and aspirations of life that challenge by image and allusion to the understanding and intelligence of the hearer, the elements that transform the poet's words from the stuff of prose to the stuff of poetry and given them their appeal even to our aesthetic feeling. Only after this does the adornments of languages come in to add to their effect. One needs no knowledge of Arabic to appreciate the almost physical excitement created among an audience of parched nomads by accumulating of similes in such a passage as:

“Twas then her beauties first enslaved my hearts
Those glittering pearls and ruby lips, whose kiss
Was sweeter far than honey to the taste.
As when a merchant opes a precious box
Of perfume, such an odour from her breath
Came toward thee, harbinger of her approach;
Or like an untouched meadow, where the rain
Hath fallen freshly on the fragrant herbs
That carpet all its pure untrodden soil:
A meadow where the frequent rain-drops fall
Like coins of silver in the quiet pools,
And irrigate it with perpetual streams;
A meadow where the sportive insects hum
Like listless toppers singing o'er their cups.

To distinguish the personality of the poets calls for an even more complex analysis and intensive study of detail, already difficult for the medieval Arabic critics. In a certain sense all Arabic odes of more than mediocre quality are subjective, but in differing manner and degrees. The productions of those poet whom we have called self-centered are more obviously so, and this self-centeredness finds, as might be expected, its

most intense expression in the robber or outlaw poets such as, to name only the most famous, Ta abbata Sharra and asha-Shanfara. The sharp and staccato *Song of Revenge* of the former is one of the best known and most often translated of Arabic poems.

Not exults he nor complains he; silent bears whatever befall him,

Much desiring, much attempting; far the wanderings of his venture.

In one desert noon beholds him; evening finds him another;

As the wild ass lone he crosses o'er the jagged and headlong ridges.

Swifter than the non-stop wind, onward yet, nor rest nor slackness,

While the howling gusts out speeded in the distance moan and falter.

Light the slumber on his eyelids, yet too heavy all he deems it;

Ever watchful for the moment when to draw the bitter falchion,

When to plunge it in the heart-blood of the many-mustered foemen.

Asha-Shanfara's poem rhyming in "Laamiyaat al-Arab" is an even more powerful composition, a unique concentration of exact observations and experiences of desert life, compressed into language of extreme tautness, and with somber undertones of bitterness, savage resentment, and covert satire of the smug tribal communities and their pampered poets.

The great majority of qaasid-poets, however, can express their personalities only in muted form, subordinated as they are not only to the conventions of their craft, but also within these limits held to the expression of the collective thought and feeling rather than their own intuitions. Nevertheless, the poet aims to centre all descriptions and ancillary themes upon his personal vision; he may not transcend the conventions, but in his imaginative handling of his topics, degree of realism and modes of idealization, he gives them fresh meaning and value in terms of his personal insights.

Imru'ul-Qais describes the storm, for example; but however naturalistic the detail it is presented in terms of his own observations and the massing of the effects is as truly his as on a painter's canvas. Yet even this degree of subjectivity is sometimes difficult to find in many qasaa-ids, and it is not surprising that the absence of personality may sometimes create a feeling that it is all a mechanical exercise and indeed nothing more than clever literary forgery.

Art-poetry:

But there is also the other side of the picture to be borne in mind. Such an art-poetry could never have come into

existence, nor have developed its technique of imaginative interplay between poet and audience, unless the audience too was gifted with peculiar aesthetic sensibilities. Even down to the present day, the apt use of words has remained the supreme art of the Arabs, exerting upon them an almost uncontrollable emotive power, and the inexhaustible richness of their language is a source of pride. Among the pre-Islamic Arabs, words in themselves seem to have retained something of their ancient mystical and magical power; the man who, by skillful ordering of vivid imagery in taut, rightly nuanced phrases, could play upon the emotions of his hearers, was not merely lauded as an artist but venerated as the protector and guarantor of the tribe and a potent weapon against its enemies. Tribal contests were fought out as much, or more, in the taunts of their respective poets as on the field of battle, and so deeply rooted was the custom that even Muhammad, although in general hostile to the influence of the poets, himself conformed to it in his later years at Madeena.

In view of such a universal veneration of the poetic art, it is not after all surprising that the productions of the great qaasid-poets were handed down from generation to generation. It was, again, not merely that they set the linguistic and aesthetic standards which were to dominate almost all Arabic poetry "and much of its prose as well" down to the modern age; but they fulfilled also another function, by no means less important. Poetry, said the later philologists, was 'the *diwaan* of the Arabs'; it preserved the collective memory of the past, and so gave an element of continuity and meaning to the otherwise fleeting and insubstantial realities of the present. In the two major themes of eulogy and satire the poets pressed home the moral antitheses and sanctions by which this collective existence was regulated and sustained. With relatively few exceptions, the pre-Islamic poets express, and even prescribe, a high standard of tribal morality, and noticeably avoid any reference to the humbler and ruder features of Bedouin life and its environment.

Fact behind the creation of the poetry:

We must not forget, however, that the population of Arabia did not consist exclusively of Bedouins. Both the agricultural Judaized tribes in the Hijaz and the other settlements and towns also had their poets, and we catch glimpses of a body of religious poetry and of drinking songs at Hira itself. The latter had some influence on the Arabic poetry of the next century, but in general the poetry of the sedentaries was regarded as inferior, and little of it has survived.

Finally, the most important cultural service which the poets rendered was their creation of a common standard of High Arabic, which as an instrument transcended narrow tribal limits, sharply distinguished Arab from non-Arab or medic, and thus supplied the substrate for a new consciousness of Arab nationhood. Although there is no evidence that the poets themselves consciously propagated it, this new national consciousness needed only a spark to awaken it. Once the spark was supplied by Islam, it was to find expression in the great movement of expansion that broke out with startling suddenness when the cities, with their greater powers of organization, supplied the cohesive force which was so marked a deficiency in the tribal society.

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