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Arabic Poetry: Origin and Development

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Abstract

Literature is based on symbols which are the basic language in human communication; the very first human language. Poetry was the expression of a collective consciousness. Poets were more committed to stylistic convention. Arabic poetry was at its zenith in Pre-Islamic period and displayed a high degree of ability and skill. Arabic poetry can serve as reliable documents that reflect the society in Pre-Islamic Period. Pre-Islamic poetry is one of the main sources for the knowledge of the living conditions of Arab society at that time. It expresses its sufferings, its internal and external situations, its hopes beliefs and culture. It was not a poetry that expressed the feelings of the individual; poets were the spokesperson of their tribes, a mirror that reflected their lives, desires, pains and hopes. The poet's suffering is derived from the suffering of his society. There are many facts of history, religion, heritage and culture that have been extracted from pre-Islamic poetry. The poetry is the greatest source of Arabic Knowledge and the most delightful part of their literature Arabic Poetry began with "Saja" Rhyme without meter at its initial stage. "Saja" as the basic tendency towards poetic temperament of the Arabs was a preliminary stage in the formation of Arabic poetry. Rajz" is the most ancient meter of Arabic Poetry. Rajz, consisting is the first-born child of Arabic poetry. This paper is a humble attempt to discuss the origin and development of Arabic Poetry in pre-Islamic period.

Key Words; Arabic Poetry, Arab Poets, Arab Society, Pre-Islamic period, Saja, Rajz

Introduction: Pre-Islamic Poetry is considered as reliable source of its times. Arabic poetry in pre-Islamic era reflects the human mind over the centuries, with its fears, its rites, its inner life, in fact the world of the ancient Arab nation as it evolved. The high degree of stylistic elegance shown by the Qasida of those days, its regular rhythm and its refined forms constitute clear proof that it is much older than any one has imagined. Pre-Islamic poets used to compose their poems about their cultural heritage, in addition to descriptions of their lives in general. Poetry is a true register in which the public and private lives of Bedouin Arabs were written down in the pre-Islamic period. The poets of those times due to their natural deposition turned their poetry. The Arabs, during their lengthy journeys back and forth across the desert, began singing to themselves songs about the desert, songs which later evolved into poems that kept them company. The sight which they saw all the time left an immutable impact on their character. It can be said, therefore, that Arabic literature was born out of the inspiration which the Arabian Desert.

Socio-Cultural, Political and Economic Status of Arab Society: The Bedouin Arabs remained vegetating for centuries in the desert. Life in pre-Islamic period was bound with the atmosphere of the desert. The routes of economic, devices of meditation and feelings were related to the hard work and the demands of the desert where their hops and dears were highly influenced by sights and surroundings. There is no doubt that in certain noble traits in the Arab character. Hospitality, love of freedom, daring, manliness, tribal fidelity and generosity were some of the qualities in which the Arab had no equal. All historians are agreed that the highest manifestation of the development of Arab culture in the century preceding Islam was poetry which was not known before that time. Poetry among the Arabs had taken the place of science, philosophy, history and everything else. If an Arab had a bright idea he would give it the form of a few verses and thus express it. Thus if someone should question what Arab culture was at that time, the answer would be 'a few stanzas of poetry. It was only in the field of poetic expression that the pre-Islamic excelled. The Bedouin's love of poetry was his one cultural asset.

Socio - Political Conditions in pre- Islamic period: The clan organization is the basis of Bedouin Society. Every tent represented a family; an encampment of tents formed *hayy*; and members of one *hayy* constituted a clan (Qawm). A number of kindred grouped together and made a tribe.¹ The Arabs never acknowledged any authority other than the chiefs of their tribes. The authority of the tribal chiefs, however, rested, in most cases, on their character and personality, and was moral rather than political. The Arabs lived generation after generation, century after century, without a government of any kind. Since there was no government, there was no law and no order. The only law of the land was lawlessness. In the event a crime was committed, the injured party took law in its own hands, and tried to administer "justice" to the offender. This system led very frequently to acts of horrendous cruelty. Blood, according to the primitive law of the desert, calls for blood.² The more impertinently, each tribe exercised a certain amount of authority in their respective areas. In Makkah, the dominant tribe was the Quraysh; in Yathrib, the dominant tribes were the Arab tribes of Aus and Khazraj, and the Jewish tribes of Nadheer, Qaynuqaa and Qurayza. The Quraysh of Makkah considered themselves superior to the Bedouins. The tribe had an obligation to protect its members even if they had committed crimes. Tribalism or '*asabiyya* (the clan spirit) took precedence over ethics. A tribe that failed to protect its members from their enemies exposed itself to ridicule, obloquy and contempt.³

Economic Situation: Sheep and camel - *rising*, horse breeding, hunting and raiding was the common occupation in pre-Islamic Arabia.⁴ The leading aspect of the Arabs economy of that time from the viewpoint of production was animal husbandry and agriculture wherever it was possible. As far as trade and exchange were concerned, their main trade was with foreign lands. Both the Arabs of Yemen and Hejaz were engaged in this activity, but since foreign trade must have links with home trade in order to exchange home-made products with foreign goods, the Arabs of that age resorted to the same practice in keeping with the level of their civilization as they do in modern times. The Arabs, too, at that time arranged fairs in the form of seasonal bazaars. In the same way that today in each season a fair is held in a city or locality in relation to local conditions, the Arabs, too, followed the same practice at different times and in particular places. A few examples of the extensive and famous exhibitions which were held in Hejaz and Najd were held annually. These fairs and seasonal bazaars were the most valuable and cherished commercial events in Arabia of those days. The merchant class who profited from those fairs did their best not to let them become mere exhibitions. Slavery was an economic institution of the Arabs. Male and female slaves were sold and bought like animals, and they formed the most depressed class of the Arabian society. The Ghazw (Razzia) was considered a form of brigandage was raised by the economic and social condition of desert life.⁵ It was the base of the economic structure of Beduin pastoral society. In desert land, where the fighting mood is a chronic mental condition, raiding is one of the occupations chosen by the people for their survival. The poet al- Qutami of the early Umyyad period has given expression to the guiding principle of such life in two verses: "our business is to make raids on the enemy, on our neighbor and on our brother, in case we find none to raid but a brother."⁶ A weaker tribe used to seek protection from strong tribe by paying a certain amount that was called *Khuwah*.⁷ War was a permanent institution of the Arabian society. War was a pastime or rather a dangerous sport or a species of tribal drama, waged by professionals, according to old and gallant codes, while the "audience" cheered. Eternal peace held no appeal for them, and war provided an escape from drudgery and from the monotony of life in the desert. War gave them an opportunity to display their skills at archery, fencing and horsemanship, and also, in war, they could distinguish themselves by their heroism and at the same time win glory and honor for their tribes. In many cases, the Arabs fought for the sake of fighting. In all the *Ayyam al- Arab*, (the records of the wars of Beduin Arabs are called *Ayyam al- Arab*) those intertribal battles of pre-Islamic days the chroniclers emphasized the blood feud motif, though underlying economic reasons.⁸

Religious Condition: The pre-Islamic Arabs used to worship the idols or gods and goddesses in various ways. They used to make supplication to them, prostrated themselves before them, made offerings to them, beseeched their favor, sought to please or propitiate them in the belief that they were capable of doing good or harm to man, sacrificed animals on altars dedicated to them, made pilgrimages to their shrines, circumambulated them and drew arrows of divination by them or in their shrines. They also used to name themselves after these gods and goddesses, such as 'Abd Yaghuth, 'Abd al-'Uzza, Polytheism was introduced at Makka after its occupation by Banu Khuza'ah, particularly by their leader 'Amr ibn Luhayy. According to Ibn Hisham 'Amr once went to Syria where he observed the people worshipping idols. He enquired of them of the reasons for their doing

so and they replied that they did so because those idols caused the ‘rains to fall for them and victory to attend them as they prayed to the idols for these things. ‘Amr was impressed and asked them whether they would give him one for his people to worship it. Accordingly they gave him the idol of Hubal which he brought to Makka, placed it near the Ka’ba and asked his people to worship it. As they considered him their leader and wise man they started worshipping the idol.⁹ Ultimately each and every tribe and clan, in fact every family, had their special idol to worship. On the eve of the Prophet’s emergence some 360 idols were placed in and around the Ka’ba. The most important of these was Hubal. Hubal was the first idol brought to the Kaaba and it was the most respected idol. Hubal was made of red agate and had a human form. It was accepted as a god by all the Arabian tribes. Two of the idols in the Ka’ba compound were ‘Isaf and Na’ila, placed originally on the spot of the Zamzam well but subsequently removed to a spot near the hills of Safa and Marwah. According to pre-Islamic belief, ‘Isaf and Na’ila were originally a man and a woman of Banu Jurhum who were turned into stones on account of their having desecrated the sacred precincts by making love in there.¹⁰ The most prominent of these shrines were those of al-Lat at Ta’if, al-‘Uzza at Nakhlah and Manat near Qudayd. The origins of these idols are uncertain. Ibn al-Kalbi says that Al-Lat was “younger” (‘ahdath) than Manat, while Al-‘Uzza was “younger” than both al-Lat and Manat.¹¹ Although, different faiths, such as Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Sabi and Hanafiyyah were common among the Arabs before the advent of Islam, the most common religious belief was no doubt a form of paganism.

The origin and development of Arabic Poetry: The conditions in Arabia during that time helped in the creation of Arabic literature. Most of the native Arabs lived and earned their living in the desert. Being their immediate environment, the desert became the first theme in Arabic literature or to be more specific, in Arabic poetry, which was the only literary genre present at that time. Prose could not have been well represented in pre-Islamic literature since no systematic way of writing had been fully developed. Arabic poetry had obscure beginning. Magicians used rhymed prose which is called “Saja”. Rhyme without meter to express their ideas as well as to give people the impression that they had spiritual power and their rhymed sentences had descended from heaven but this kind of sentences had no significance and not considered a part of literature. Bedouin Arabs believed that every poet had a spirit or devil that inspired him to compose poetry.¹² Arabic Poetry began with “Saja” Rhyme without meter at its initial stage. As magician used to speak rhymed prose and they also used to sing rhymed prose like poem.¹³ The use of poetry as lyrics for songs was a phenomenon widely practiced throughout the history of pre-Islamic Arabic culture. “Saja” as the basic tendency towards poetic temperament of the Arabs was a preliminary stage in the formation of Arabic poetry. With the passing of time, Arabic poetry transferred from “Saja” to “Rajz”. “Rajz” was based on the pace of the camel. It primarily means a tremor in the hind-quarters of a camel.¹⁴ Jurzi Zaidan writes “Rajz” is the most ancient meter of Arabic Poetry. Each verse has its separate rhyme. It is like “Saja” but rhythmically balanced.¹⁵ Rhyme in Arabic poetry was based on sound. There was no concept of visual rhyme. Rajz went one further step and emerged as rhymes and rhythmic pulses while Rajz earlier was a kind of sound in the camel driver’s song *hida*.¹⁶ Arabic poetry was in its full form before Arabs became familiar with music. It is worth mentioning that Arabs had a natural gift of music. Numerous examples can be cited that love of music in poetry that had been sung by the Musician in pre-Islamic period. The song of the camel-riders *huda* is to be seen second source of the poetical form. Arabic tradition which tries to explain the origin of its poetry in the attempt of the cameleer to sing in time with the rhythmic movements of the camel’s pace may after all contain a germ of truth. The word *hadi*, singer, is synonymous with *saiq*, camel rider. The rhythm, the rhyme, the music produce on them the effect of what they call “Lawful magic” (Shir halal)¹⁷ the rhymed prose used by the oracles and soothsayers (kuhhan) is to be considered the first stage in the development of the poetical form.¹⁸ Rajz, consisting is the first-born child of Arabic poetry.¹⁹ Hence, *Rajz* is the father and *Saja* is the mother of Arabic poetry.

Arabic Poetry in Pre-Islamic Period: The earliest sources tell us about early Arabic poetry from the 5th century A.D. At this point of time Arabic poetry must have been developed for some time. Arabic literature and poetry came into existence before the advent of Islam. The intellectual development lies only in the field of poetry in pre-Islamic period. It is called “*Register of the Arabs*”. Poetry became the only means of literary expression.²⁰ The political, ethical, intellectual and religious meditations of Arabs are scattered in pre-Islamic Poetry. Poetry in the days of ignorance was to the Arabs the record

of all they knew.²¹ The art of poetry among of all literary genres was a good sort for the Arabs. Therefore, they made it the record of their knowledge and wisdom.²² The poetry is the greatest source of Arabic Knowledge and the most delightful part of their literature.²³ The poetry was at its zenith in Pre-Islamic period and displayed a high degree of ability and skill. It is interesting to note that the art of writing was not unknown to the Arabs even their poetry was not preserved in writing. Poetical compositions of the Dark Age have all come down to us through oral tradition with the solitary exception of the pieces known as the *Mu'allaqat* which were committed to writing and hung on the walls of the Ka'bah. Each of these odes was awarded the annual prize at the fair of Ukaáz and was described in golden letters and then hung up on the wall of Ka'bah.²⁴ Muhalhil b. Rabiá, the Taghlib hero of the Basús war, is credited to be the first who composed the long poems *Qasidah* in history of Arabic poetry. As regards Arab development of the art of poetry, it is enough to say that mere poetry, as such, affords no sure criterion of a people's stage of civilization. Interest in poetry is observed in almost every stage of society. The *Qasidahs* were divided into three broad sections: the *nasib*, the *rahil* and the *madih*. It is the *nasib* that opened the *Qasidah*. When the poet satisfied that his audience were listening to him attentively he come to *rahil* where he lamented the fatigue of his travel, the passing of sleepless nights, the oppressiveness of the midday heat and then emaciation of his camel. When a poet caught the attention of listener he started self-praise *madih* or *fakhr* in which he described his superiority over his peers and story of his braveness.²⁵

The early *Qasidah* was a poem indented to convey a message. Ibn Qutaibah attempted to summarize *Qasidah's* structure in his book *Kitabul-Shi'r wa al-Shu'ara* saying that *Qasidah* is a tripartite structures. The goal of Ibn Qutaibah's description seems to be the provision of some basic parameters for an analysis of structures that would match that of a substantial number of early Arabic poems in *Qasidah* form.²⁶ Muhalhil b. Rabiá, the Taghlib hero of the Basús war, is credited to be the first who composed the long poems *Qasidah* in history of Arabic poetry.²⁷ The Arabs were a people with a poetic bent even though their land was no land of flowers and nightingales, but only thorns and sand, yet it nurtured many a poet. As poetry was esteemed by them to be the highest manifestation of culture, their poets were on the lookout for a suitable spot to present their poems. The finest of their poems were then inscribed on posters and hung on the walls of the Ka'aba in the annual rendezvous of the Arabs. They called these posters 'Mu'allaqat' meaning 'hanging verses'. Such display on the walls of the Ka'aba was the the reward for the poets, who as a result became famous. Amra' al-Qais and other contemporary poets of early Islam were among the poets thus honoured. They were the authors of 'the seven hanging pieces' that had found place of honour on the walls of the Ka'aba. Among the ancient odes *Qasidah*, seven *Mu'allqat* hold the first place. These are still honored as masterpieces of poetic composition.²⁸

The role of Poets and Poetry in Arabian Society: The poet in Arabic is one sense, one who perceives things that other people cannot do. Such a view of the poet encouraged the notion that such people were born and not made. The poetic gift was the consequence of innate rather than acquired qualities; not that certain skills did not have to be learned, but that spark of intangible genius had to be already present for a poet to become really great. Poets in Pre-Islamic Arabian society were believed to be gifted with insight, and their utterance possessed special power, the power of words. A truly gifted poet was a cause for great rejoicing for the tribe he belonged.²⁹

The early Arabs used poetry as a weapon against their enemy tribes. They used Arabic literature as a silent sword aimed at the hearts of the opposing camp, not with the purpose of drawing blood, but with the goal of insulting the pride of their enemies through words. Clement Huart presented proof for this in his book *A History of Arabic Literature*. According to him, the poet was expected to compose satires which would consequently provoke the poets of their enemy tribes to come up with retaliating satires. Because of this, poetry became a social tool and poets acquired for themselves a highly-respected position in the society. The poet was a tribal artist, chronicler, advocate, publicist, philosopher and prophet. The function of the poet in Pre-Islamic society was a religious one. Poetry was ritualized and the audience of a poet thought that he control or affect the fate of the tribe through his gifted divine inspiration. A poet had power to affect the outcome of wars or could grant people with blessings or afflict them with curses. The poet was also the chronicler of his community. It is also known that poetry was a substitute of war. A tribe with an excellent poet could easily dominate other tribes.³⁰ The importance of the poets as chronicler of his tribe is shown by the following verse: "what has been said has been said, be true or false, how can you be excused against words already

spoken?"³¹In Pre Islamic period, the spontaneous poetry of the nomads prevailed. While early verses described nomadic life in the desert. The poet was the speaker of his tribe, challenging voices and thoughts towards society outside the tribe, but instead using lyrical "I" "was more familiar to us. The Pre Islamic poets used lyrical "We". Pre- Islamic poets, the journalists of that time, never tired of singing the praise of *Dhiyafat* hospitality and *Murru'ah* manliness that was considered one of the supreme virtues of the race.³²

Poetry was the expression of a collective consciousness. Poets were more committed to stylistic convention in which they sought safety. Through a poetical discourse, a sense of harmony between two tribes could be brought and message of peace spread. Zuhair Ibn Abu Sulma can be cited an example who was able to restore peace in Abs and Dhubyani tribes who were in wars more than forty years on silly thing only on the basis of their ego that war is known in Arab history as War of Dahis and Ghabra. Two chieftains responded to the appeal of Zuhair bin Abi Sulma and made an enormously generous offer to bring the cycle of violence to an end, offering three thousand camels over a three year period to settle the dispute.³³ The poet in pre- Islamic era, being an oracle, guide, orator and spoke person of his community, he was its historian and scientist. Bedouin Arabs used to measure intelligence by poetry. They felt proud on three things generally over their rivals. The numbers of their horsemen, the number of their members, and the numbers of poets they had.³⁴ As a historian and scientist of his community, the poet was well versed in its genealogy and folklore, cognizant of the attainments and past achievements of its members, familiar with their rights, pasture- lands and borderlines. Furthermore he knew the weakness and historical failures of the rival tribes. It was his business to expose these shortcomings and hold them up to ridicule.³⁵ The assimilation of poets as professionals into the urban lifestyle was a subtle process that took place in pre-Islamic era as poets became more closely associated with courts of the ruling class. Al-Nabigha al-Dhubyani, for example, was reportedly the first Arab poet who accepted rewards from Nu'man b. al- Mundhir, and became so rich that he used to eat and drink in gold and silver bowls.³⁶

Conclusion: Arabic poetry has its roots in the pre- Islamic culture of the Arabs. Poetry is the record of Arabs in the sense that poetry was the true register in which the public and private lives of the Arabs reflected clearly. Arabic poetry described the life of Bedouins and painted it in imaginary colors. It refrains from quoting and wisdom but Arab poets wrote about everything that they felt and saw. Their depictions and imagery were taken from the phenomena that they perceived with their eyes and their poetic treasure was derived from the environment in which they grew up. It may be concluded that poetry is the Arabs' historical record because of the great depth of its sources in human history. Pre-Islamic poetry is, thus, a document that can provide a clear picture of the society of those times. Poetry was considered the vehicle in which their language, culture and socio- economic life was preserved in its purest form. Arabic Poetry began with "Saja" Rhyme without meter at its initial stage. "Saja" as the basic tendency towards poetic temperament of the Arabs was a preliminary stage in the formation of Arabic poetry. "Rajz" is the most ancient meter of Arabic Poetry and consisting is the first- born child of Arabic poetry.

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