

Arabic Literary Criticism in Pre-Islamic Period

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Abstract:

Arabic literature began planting its seeds in Arabian soil two hundred years before the advent of Islam. Arabic literature sprang into existence with an outburst of poetry. Arabic poetry has been recognized as register of Arabs and a mirror of Arabian life. Poetry is the greatest source of Arabic Knowledge and the most delightful part of Arabic literature. The literary criticism is broadly used to cover the whole field of literary appreciation, analysis, judgment and the comparison on the practical as well as the theoretical side. The period of criticism in Arabic literature extends from the Pre-Islamic to the present time. Arabs achieved a high measure of perfection in their poetry tow century before the advent of Islam. The miraculous sign of Islam came in the form of “Clear Arabic Book” was destined to play an important role in Arabic language and consequently in the enrichment of Arabic literary criticism. The Arabs were noted for their literary excellence. Poetry and Oratory were the mass level forms of their artistic expression. In Pre- Islamic era, when Arabic poetry was in its flowering period, some rudimentary form of practical criticism had appeared. The history of Arabic literary criticism indicates the immensity of its wealth and difficulties of spreading the Arab contribution in this field. The aim of this paper is to discuss the origin, development and significance of literary criticism in pre-Islamic period. This paper also highlights the trends and functions of literary criticism that occurred in classical Arabic poetry.

Key words: Arabic literature, Poets, Poetry, Criticism, Pre- Islamic period,

Introduction:

Literature is a mirror of life. Poetry is a form of literature in which all aspects of the society reflected. Arabic poetry has been recognized as a “Records of Arabs” a resort in times of sorrow and happiness, defeat and victory. The Arabic poetry that developed before the advent of Islam reflected the cultural and economic affairs of the day. A social change to certain extent is influenced by the language as an important element in cultural system. Classical Arabic had been introduced from the 6th century. The Bedouin Arabs who composed their poems in a sophisticated language is rich in vocabulary, expression and description. The themes of classical Arabic poetry circled around praise, chiding, grief, love, war, brave, landscape and camels. The Arabs were noted for their literary excellence. Poetry and oratory were the most popular forms of their artistic expression. When Arabic poetry was in its flowering period, some rudimentary forms of practical criticism had been witnessed. Arabic literary criticism indicates the immensity of its wealth and difficulties of spreading the Arab contribution in this field. In writing the literary criticism and its origin, development and function, it is customary to begin with a survey of the political, economic, social and religious conditions of Bedouin Arabs in Pre-Islamic era.

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. 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 leading aspect of the Arabs economy of that time from the viewpoint of production was animal husbandry and agriculture wherever it was possible. 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.”² 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. 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. A well known historian named

Ya'qubi has written that 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.

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.³ 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.⁴ "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."⁵ 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".⁶ 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*.⁷ The song of the camel- riders *huda* is to 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. Rajz, consisting is the first-born child of Arabic poetry.⁸ Hence, we conclude that *Rajz* is the father and *Saja* is the mother of Arabic poetry.

The rhymed prose used by the oracles and soothsayers (*kuhhan*) is to be considered the first stage in the development of the poetical form.⁹ 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.¹⁰ The rhythm, the rhyme, the music produce on them the effect of what they called *Shír halal* "Lawful magic".¹¹ 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.¹² 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.

Arabic Poetry in Pre- Islamic Period:

Arabic literature and poetry came into existence before the advent of Islam. Pre-Islamic poetry is the only source of finding out the principles of Arabic literary criticism during the days of 'ignorance'. 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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ The poetry is the greatest source of Arabic Knowledge and the most delightful part of their literature.¹⁶ 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 Arabic 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.¹⁷ The early Qasidah was a poem indented to convey a message. Ibn Qutaibah attempted to summarize Qasidah's structure in his book *Kitabual-Shi'r wa al-Shuára* 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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ Among the ancient odes *Qasidah*, seven Muállqat hold the first place. These are still honored as masterpieces of poetic composition.²⁰ 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. 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 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 honored. They were the authors of 'the seven hanging pieces' that had found place of honor on the walls of the Ka'aba.²¹

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.²²

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.²³ 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.²⁴ 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?”²⁵ In 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”²⁶ in composing poetry representing all members of his tribe.

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 a message of peace spread. Zuhair Ibn Abu Sulma can be cited as an example who was able to restore peace in Abs and Dhubyān tribes who were in wars more than forty years on a 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.²⁷ 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.²⁸ The poet in pre-Islamic era, being an oracle, guide, orator and spokesman 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.²⁹ 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.³⁰

Criticism:

The Arabic word “Naqd” linguistic meaning is to separate the good currency from the bad one and it is also employed to examine the same.³¹ Al-Himsi quotes the following three definitions of *Naqd* and *Intiqad* from Ibn Manzur’s *Lisan al-Arab*; (*language of the Arabs*)’isolating fake coin; examining a thing by tapping it and discussing a matter with someone. The latter two definitions imply a certain perception of criticism.³² The above definitions clearly indicate that *Naqd* is *Tamyíz* and that in the present situation it specifically means to identify shortcomings in any poetic composition. This word “*Naqd*” as a term is applied in the meaning of criticism. The term gives

broadly meaning to understand, information, comparison and judgments. In fact, the word employed in the sense of “criticism”. Criticism in the Arabic literature means is to interpret poetry according to the pattern of Pre- Islamic poetry, so that there is a prescribed course for the poets. There is neither a philosophical aspect, nor a meditational. The best experience among them is in the rhetoric”.³³ Ahmed Amin gives defines criticism saying the word “*Naqd*” in its subtle significance is concerned with evaluation”.³⁴ Dr. Mohammed Mandur describes the function of criticism “The literary criticism in its limited meaning is an art of the study of the styles that distinguish between writers. On this basis we note the significance of the word “*Usloob*” style in its broad sense. That is, the manner of common writer, his in composition, expression, speculation and sensitivity.”³⁵

“The criticism is an art of studying the matters to interpret them, to analyze them, and to compare them with other of the same quality, and then, to give judgment on them describing their merits and their places with others. Its function is to apply in the concrete and in the abstract, in sciences and arts and in every matter that concerns to life. We have found that the forerunners who wrote about Arabic literary criticism were inclined to employ the word “*Naqd*’ in these relative meanings. The books *Naqd-al- Sh’ir* and *Naqd- al-Nasr* of Qudamah bin Ja’far and the book, *Al-Umdah*” of Ibn Rashiq and other books of comparative study of the poets describe the process of study of poetry or prose, of their interpretation, their elements, their arts, the reason of their merits and demerits and principles of literature”.³⁶

Literary Criticism in Pre-Islamic period:

From early times, the Arabs were noted for their literary excellence. Poetry and oratory were the most popular forms of their artistic expression. When Arabic poetry was in its flowering period, some rudimentary forms of practical criticism has been witnessed. These were preserved by narrators, and later recorded by the early authors. In pre- Islamic period there grew a number of market place in Arabian Peninsula where people of different tribes used to assemble for trade as well as for their literary contests. Ukaz was the most famous annual fair where poet’s most excellent work was selected and later was hang on the wall of Ka’ba and these poems were called *Mu’allqat* which was considered as masterpiece of Arabic poetry.³⁷

Sometime before Islam, there grew a number of markets places in Arabian Peninsula where people of different tribes used to gather for trade s well as for literary contests. The rival tribe downgraded the poet and attacked his poetic work with opposing standpoints. Eminent poets attended cultural and literary programmes where they recited their poem and the excellent poets were honored and

awarded by titles. This kind of verdict and judgment proves that literary criticism was judicious in Pre-Islamic period. Jurji Zaidan writes; “There were held number of public meetings annual festivals where they assembled to recite verses, to exchange information, and to discussed their general business life. These meetings were called “Andiya” that means councils. Among them, there was a council of the Quraish and Dar al- Nadwa in the vicinity of Kába. There would be a courtyard in front of each house for a get together. A general meeting of each tribe was held in large tents. While they gathered, they recited verses and talked.³⁸ Al-Nabigha al-Dhubyani was the literary boss of his time whose remarks was highly appreciated in pre- Islamic poetry. There was erected a red tower of leather in the fair of Ukaz. The poets visited there and presented their best and latest poems at al- Nabigha. Once Abu Basher al-Áasa recited his latest poem to al Nabigha, then Hassan bin Thabit and some other poets. At the end, al-Khansa came and recited. Al-Nabigha said: “If Abu Bashir did not recite to him previously he would say that she was the best poet among all human beings. Hassan said, as a poet I am superior to you, to your father and to your grandfather. Al-Nabigha had no capacity to compose such verses as mine. And he recited: you are like a night which will reach me, although I think that there is a vast way by which I may escape from you. He asked al- Khansa to recite and she recited to him, after that al-Nabigha said that he was not serious poet than her.”³⁹ In another story, al-Nabigha al Dhubyani commented on tow lines of poetry when Hassan b. Thabit recited to him. “You are a poet, but you reduced the number if your swords (referring to Lana al- Jafanat al-ghurr, jafanat being in a plural form that denotes small numbers) and you boasted of whom you gave birth to, not of who gave birth to you”.⁴⁰

It was a general rule of a Qasidah in Arabic poetry that the Rhyme of the two halves of the first verse of the Qasidah is used and same rhyme is used in second verse and in the third to as well as in the following verse to last. If a poet failed to follow this rule in his Qasidah. This kind of defect was called “Iqwa”.⁴¹ The Qasidah could be any of the other recognized poetic genres, like boasting *Fakhr*, *Hijja* or *Hikam*. Qasidah began with Nasib. Nasib was essentially a means for the poet to win over attention of his audience. Emotion, imagination and meditation were the basic elements to produce a literary masterpiece. Arabic Poetry in pre- Islamic period reached its peak after a long process of gestation. Literary criticism in the Pre-Islamic period was impressive and trivial. It had the pronouncement of emotion and natural taste. Al-Nuibigha’s judgments were also based on his literary test. The judgments were issued without any analysis or pretence.⁴² The critics had no adequate idea of literature in their mind with an intellectual mode of expression and artistic manners, only the beautiful blend of words and meanings were examined. Criticism in this period

is limited as there was no any developed principle. Shauqi Dhaif gives his opinion: "It is wrong to demand suitable form critics of the Pre- Islamic period. It suffices to say that they may present impressions of the poet and his poetry. Criticism developed practically in pre- Islamic period. The poets themselves are reasons for its development, because they were expressing their remarks to their associates."⁴³ Criticism in Pre-Islamic period can be considered as an approach to criticism, and not a form of literature, because there was no comprehensive interpretation of art, Criticism is the art of interpreting art. Poetry is the only source in Pre- Islamic period to find the principles of literary criticism. "Alqama bin Abduh who was a contemporary of Imra'ul-Qais was his rival. Once the appointed Umme Jundab, the wife of Imra'ul-Qais a judge. She asked them to compose two separate verse s on the description of their horses in the same scale, meter and rhyme. Imra'ul-Qais recited saying "It is like a flame sets with a kick and glitters with a whip and a scold invokes it and it makes hasty to speed along. al- Qama said: "It runs like a wind in a moment when the bridle is pushed and it passes like the morning wind."⁴⁴ Umme jundab praised the al-Qama's poem saying his horse ran with signal of the bride, whereas, the horse of Imra'ul-Qais was not so quick and it needed a whip. Here we see Umme Jundab underlined the superiority of one poet upon another only on the basis of literary taste. Hence, literary taste was the only principle and the appraisal of the work of a poet in Pre Islamic era. The assumption concerning the nature of poetic talent led early Arab critics to assign greater credit to natural Poetry *al-Sh'eir al-Matbú* rather than to artificial poetry *al-Shér al Masnú*.

Conclusion:

Sometime before Islam, there grew a number of markets places in Arabian Peninsula where people of different tribes used to gather for trade s well as for literary contests. Names recognized arbiter in those contests, such as al- Nabugha al-Dhubyani, and their judgments and criticism were handed down to posterity by *rawis*. Naturally, very little explanations or justification was offered for such judgments, and very often one poem or even one verse would be given as a ground for a high praise of a poet. Some companions of Prophet of Islam were known for their appreciation and sound judgment of Pre-Islamic poetry.

In sum, literary criticism in Pre-Islamic period was based on the poetic sensuousness which left its influence on the sense of reader. The literary taste was a part of their nature and their creative quality. They did not have any principle or theory of literary interpretation to measure and judge masterpieces of their literature. The critics of that period managed to discover a numbers of defects in practical craftsmanship and to give valuable practical advice to the poets. The logic, sense, and

literary taste were basis of their literary appreciation. Hence, the criticism in Pre- Islamic period was in initial stage but to a marked degree, sound and convincing, as emanated genuine practical literary taste.

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