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JAHILIYYA POETRY: THE DIWAN OR REGISTER OF ARABS

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to study about the features of Jahiliyya Poetry and the various roles of poets in that society. Pre-Islamic Arabian literature, particularly poetry, was a cornerstone of Arab cultural and social life in the 150 years before the birth of Prophet Muhammad, often regarded as the golden age of Arabian poetry. Largely oral in nature, it reflected the people's beliefs, rituals, and everyday experiences, while poets were highly esteemed as heroes and key figures within their tribes. The 5th century A.D. brought a unified spoken language that aided the spread and preservation of poetry, which evolved from simple forms like *saj'* (rhymed prose) and *rajaz* to the more complex *qasida*, characterized by structured couplets and themes of love, beauty, and tribal pride. The celebrated *Muallaqath* odes represent the peak of this tradition. Beyond artistic expression, poets served as protectors, historians, genealogists, and ambassadors, documenting events and guiding their communities, making poetry often called the "Diwan of Arabs"-a vital source of historical, social, and cultural knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

Pre-Islamic Arabian literature, especially poetry, played an essential role in the life of the Arabs. Before the rise of Islam, poetry was an oral tradition passed down through generations, reflecting the beliefs, culture, and daily experiences of the people. The period 150 years before the birth of Prophet Muhammad is often called the golden age of Arabian poetry, during which poets produced exceptional works. Arabs highly valued poetry, considering it a sign of beauty and intelligence. The emergence of a poet was celebrated, and poetry was used to convey messages, tell stories, and record important events.

The 5th century A.D. was a crucial time when a common spoken language began to unify Arabia, making poetry easily understood across the region. The development of poetry began with rhymed prose (known as 'saja') and evolved into more structured forms, such as the 'Rajaz' (simple meter-based poems) and the 'Qasida' (a more complex form of poetry). The famous *Muallaqath*, a set of seven renowned odes, represent the peak of pre-Islamic poetry.

Poets in this era had a significant influence on their tribes. They were not only artists but also protectors, chroniclers, genealogists, journalists, and diplomats. Through their poetry, they recorded wars, celebrated heroic deeds, and provided guidance to their people. The poems from this time are valuable historical sources, often referred to as the "Diwan of Arabs," offering a window into the culture and society of pre-Islamic Arabia.

The pre-Islamic Arabian literature reflects the life of a wide section. But that existed only on the lips of the Arabs in the form of a melody or poetry. This poetry reflects the religious beliefs and rituals prevalent in Arabia. The 150 years before the birth of the Prophet Muhammad was the golden age of Arabian poetry. During this period Arabia produced poems of par-excellence.

To an Arab the beauty of a man lies on his tongue. So he admired poetry and oratory. The emergence of a poet in a tribe was celebrated with great festivities. They used not to wish one another except for three things-that is the birth of a male child, the foaling of a noble mare and coming to light of a poet¹.

As early as the 5th Century A.D. the whole of Arabia possessed a common political language. So the situation in the 5th Century A.D. was favorable for the beginning of a poetic era. Further, in the 5th Century A.D. there was only a spoken language to the whole of Arabia. So their poems were easily understood by any Arab from any part of Arabia. This peculiar



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feature of Arabic language helped for the propagation and preservation of Arabic Poetry for next generations. It is said that the unwritten words of the Arabian poets flew across the deserts faster than arrows. These poems were preserved in the memory of the people.

Famous Arab historian Masudi who is considered as the 'Herodotus of Arabs' gives an account of the origin of the Arabic poetry that once an Arab named Mudar was travelling on his camel; suddenly he fell down and his hand was broken. But he continued his journey with weeping 'Ya Yadee (Ohh my hand....). This weeping Sound along with the rhythmic sound of camel's step gave birth to the first Arabic poemⁱⁱ.

The rhymed prose used by soothsayers and camel drivers is considered the first stage in the development of pre-Islamic poetry. It was called '*saja*' or rhymed prose. The Qura'n itself is an excellent example of rhymed prose.

The '*Rajaz*' constituted the second stage in the development of Jahiliyya poetryⁱⁱⁱ. The *rajaz* were poems with meter which shaped the oldest and simplest form of Jahiliyya poetry. It is considered as the first born child of poetry.

Out of *Rajaz*, the most finished type of poetical composition *Qasida* was evolved. Generally *Qasida* consists of couplets with Specific meters. The couplets vary in number from 15 to 150 and it ends in the same rhyme. The *Qasida*, is in fact a mono-drama. The actor is the poet. He is also the hero of the drama. Generally it begins with the mention of his beloved and followed by the description of her beauty.

Among the ancient odes (*Qasida*), the *Muallaqath* occupies the first place. They are the masterpieces of poetical composition. It is considered the drugs of the literature. The famous *Muallaqath* were written by Imrul Qays, Amr Ibn Kulthum, Anthara Ibn Shaddad, Tarafa Ibn Abd, Zuhair Ibn Abi Salma, Labid Ibn Abi Rabia and Harith Ibn Hilliza.

Imru' al-Qays (c. 501–540 CE) Often called the greatest pre-Islamic poet, he was a prince of the Kindah tribe who became a vagabond ("al-Malik al-Dillil") after his father was killed. His ode is famous for its romantic openings and descriptions of his horse. He is sometimes considered the father of Arabic poetry. He was also referred to as "the Lost King" (*al-Malik aḍ-Ḍalīl*) because he was never able to recover his father's throne^{iv}.

Tarafa ibn al-'Abd: An Arabian poet of the tribe of the Bakr. A young, talented poet from the Bakr tribe known for his proud, intense style. His poem explores themes of pleasure, death, and detailed descriptions of his camel.

Zuhayr ibn Abī Sulmā:Pre-Islamic Arabian poet who lived in the 6th & 7th centuries AD. He is considered one of the greatest writers of Arabic poetry in pre-Islamic times. Zuhayr belonged to the Banu Muzaina. His father was a poet and his elder son Ka'b bin Zuhayr also became a poet, reading his works to the Islamic prophet Muhammad. Known as a moral poet who praised wisdom, peace, and moral excellence. His poem is noted for its ethical maxims and praise of leaders who settled tribal disputes.

Labīd ibn Rabī'ah: An Arab poet from higher Nejd and a companion of the Islamic prophet Muhammad. He belonged to the Bani Amir, a division of the tribe of the Hawazin.^v A recognized master of poetry who later lived to embrace Islam. His poetry is admired for its eloquence and reflections on life, death, and nature.

'Antarah ibn Shaddād: Pre-Islamic Arab poet and knight belonging to the Arab tribe of Banu 'Abs, famous for both his poetry and his adventurous life. A celebrated warrior-poet born to a slave mother. His poem emphasizes chivalry, love, and courage in battle.

'Amr ibn Kulthūm: a poet and chieftain of the Taghlib tribe in pre-Islamic Arabia. A proud tribal leader who composed his poem as a boast for his tribe, Taghlib, celebrating their dominance and defiance.

Al-Ḥārith ibn Ḥilliza: Pre-Islamic Arabian poet of the tribe of Bakr, from the 5th century. A poet known for advocating on behalf of his tribe, Bakr, and settling disputes through eloquent speech.



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Their poems are called ‘*Saba ’ul Muallaqath* or Seven Suspended Odes’. Each of these odes was awarded the annual prize at the fair of *Ukaz* and was inscribed in golden letters and suspended on the walls of Ka’aba^{vi}.

Various Roles of a Poet

The Arabs used to call the poet as ‘*Shahir*’ which means ‘one who knows’ or ‘the learned’. Hence the poet is considered the most learned among the Arabs and the most influential person in the Arabian society. He was the protector of his tribe. He used the poems as weapons to ward off insults and to demean the enemy tribe.

The poet was the chronicler of his tribe. The poet used to record important events in the form of verses. It is easier to remember than prose. The tribal wars of the Arabs and the fact picture of the day to day life of the Arabs were vividly described the poems. Through these poems, Jahiliyya Arabs perpetuated their glorious deeds. If a war took place, the leading commander of a tribe was the poet^{vii}. He gave the instructions to the people of his tribe. In battles his tongue was effective as his people’s bravery.

The poet was the genealogist of his tribe. The Arabs were proud of their genealogy. Each family had its genealogical traditions and handed it over from generation to generation through poems. It was their practice to remember their forefather’s names and their glorious deeds.

The poet was the journalist of his tribe. Through the poet, the current events were spread within the tribe and outside the tribe. The poet sang songs praising his patrons. So such people gave liberal patronage to poets for getting name and fame through poems.

The poet was the ambassador of his tribe. It was through the poets that one tribe contacted with other tribes. Thus he served on the ‘public relation officer’ of his tribe. He also represented his tribe for the negotiations of trade pacts. He also point out the weakness and failure of his tribe.

Jahiliyya Arabs consulted the poet about the matters of their life.They used to seek his advice in fixing marriages, starting buicsiness and building new houses etc. The poet was the oracle of his tribe. The Arabs believed that the poet could predict the future. So, before undertaking any serious matters, Arabs sought the opinion of poet.

In short, poets and poetry was considered very significant role in the tribal life of Jahiliyya Arabia. The Jahiliyya poetry sheds light on all phases of Jahiliyya life.at that time there existed no holy books or Vedas, political or religious leaders and political parties to give advice to the people. It was the poets who gave all kinds of advices and recommendations. Any information about the Jahiliyya period we can depend upon the poems. It is an important source for the study of history of Jahiliyya. So the historians called the Jahiliyya poetry as the ‘Register of Arabs or the Diwan of Arabs’.

CONCLUSION

Pre-Islamic Arabian poetry stands as a powerful cultural and historical force that shaped and preserved the identity of Arab society during the Jahiliyya period. Emerging from a rich oral tradition, it evolved from simple rhymed prose like *saja* into sophisticated poetic forms such as *rajaz* and the highly structured *qasida*, reaching its artistic peak in the celebrated *Mu’allaqat*. Poetry was far more than a literary expression; it functioned as the collective voice of the people, embodying their values, beliefs, emotions, and social structures. Poets held an exceptional status, serving simultaneously as historians, genealogists, diplomats, journalists, and advisors, guiding their tribes in both peace and conflict. In the absence of written records, formal institutions, or organized religious and political systems, poetry became the primary medium for recording history, transmitting knowledge, and preserving traditions across generations. Its widespread comprehension, aided by a common spoken language, ensured its continuity and influence throughout Arabia. Thus, Jahiliyya poetry rightly earns its title as the “Diwan of Arabs,” offering invaluable insight into the life, thought, and cultural richness of pre-Islamic Arabia.



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Endnotes

- ⁱ R.A Nicholson, A Literary History of Arabs,P.71
- ⁱⁱ Nadeem S.H, “A Critical Appreciation of Arabic Mystical Poetry”, Delhi (1993), P.10
- ⁱⁱⁱ Hitti P.K,” History of the Arabs”, London (1937),P.24
- ^{iv} Jamal Mohammed, “The Arabs a Political and Cultural History”, Thiruvananthapuram (2023),P.39
- ^v Ghulam Musthafa, “Religious Trends in Pre Islamic Arabic Poetry”, Aligarh (1968),P.16
- ^{vi} Amir Ali, “The Spirit of Islam”, London (1922),P.13
- ^{vii} Magoliouth D.S,”Arabic Historians”, Culcutta(1930),P.18

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5. Magoliouth D.S,”Arabic Historians”, Culcutta(1930)
6. Nadeem S.H, “A Critical Appreciation of Arabic Mystical Poetry”, Delhi (1993)
7. Nicholson R.A, “A Literary History of Arabs”,Cambridge (1907)