



## Pre-Islamic Arabic Poetry: A Thematic Study

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### ABSTRACT

“Poetry is the Arabs' archive,” as it serves as a reflection of the environment in which its owners lived. It mirrors various psychological aspects and the moral ideals of the Arabs. As a consequence, the themes and forms of pre-Islamic poetry were diverse. Poetry was innate to the Arabs and was rare if someone did not excel in it. Poetry was akin to their soul which was essential for their lives, its significance made it deeply influential. It was esteemed by men, women, thieves, and even the insane. Poets held a high status and played a vital role in building their tribes and making them a unified social unit. They were the protectors of honour, preservers of legacy, and conveyors of news. Pre-Islamic poetry portrayed their eloquence and how they were profoundly affected by it, capturing their aspirations, dreams, and every hue and scene of life. This paper aims to shed light on the characteristics and themes of pre-Islamic poetry as a treasure trove of Bedouin heritage and a testament to the poetic genius of the Arab poets.

**Keywords:** Pre-Islamic Poetry, Poetic Themes, Social life, Desert, Bravery.

### Introduction:

The pre-Islamic poem has been the subject of significant studies conducted by Arab and Orientalist researchers working in various fields of Arabic and Islamic studies, including linguistic, historical, intellectual, and cultural disciplines. The main reason behind their meticulous study is the evident interest that the pre-Islamic society had in literature, especially poetry which reached its zenith during that era. Poetry resonated with their identity, as it was intrinsically tied to their lineage, heritage, and history. For this reason, Arabs named their poems much like they named mountains and valleys as if these poems were major landmarks in Arabic literature. Examples include the Mu'allakat, Mudhahhabat, Samut, and Munasafat. Arabs also named poems based on their opening verses, such as “Qifa Nabki” and “Banat Suaad.”

### Objectives of the Study:

- To find out the values and position of pre Islamic Arabic poetry.
- To study the rich treasure of themes found in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry.

### Methodology:

The study is mainly based on analytical method. The data were collected from secondary sources like books on Arabic poetry, books on literary history of the Arabs, magazines and journals etc.

### Source of Pre-Islamic Arabic Poetry

There is no exact information about when, where or how poetry originated in Arabic literature, but the origin of the pre-Islamic Poetry is very ancient. According to sources about its origin, it is found that the poetry of the pre-Islamic period originated from a type of ancient ornate prose called “Saaja”. This form of expression had a terrible and mysterious sense of rhythm. So it is called the organizational level of ancient Arabic poetry. According to Jurzi zaidan, an Arab historian that at that time the camel drivers used to sing a kind of song called 'Huda songs' to accelerate the speed of the camels. The Arabic poem is the reform of these “Huda songs”. According to some others, Arabic poem originated with the incident of Mudar bin Nizar. The account says that while traveling in the desert, he fell from the back of his camel and broke his arm. Then he lamented in pain “O Aidah, O Aidah” ('Oh hand, oh hand'). His voice was so sweet that even the camel was impressed

by his painful voice and started again at high speed. It is said that this event led to the origin of Huda or camel drivers song in the rhythm of "Rajaz". "Rajaz" is a two-lettered four- to six- syllable verse. The difference between "saaja" and "Rajaz" is that 'Rajaz' has weight or rhythm but 'Saaja' has no such rhythm. It is a form of poetry that has been used in Arabia since ancient times. Arabic poetry was originally verbal. Later on the Arabs used it for various purposes of daily life such as encouraging war, celebrating birthdays, describing war, describing genealogy and pride of the clan, teaching behavior and praising people. They used some measures in right direction to keep balance in their sayings and then it was called "Sher" (poetry).

In addition to the "Saaja" and "Rajaz" another long form of poetry was found at that time in Arabic poetry called "Qasidah" (long poetry). "Qasidah" is a standard poetry of the sixth century. Civil wars that occurred often among the various Arab tribes inspired in creation of long poetry or "Qasidas" and it was a major part of the pre-Islamic Arabs. These long poems describe the social life, beliefs and culture of different tribes, loyalty to their tribes, hero worship, ancestors, genealogies, their hospitality, revenge, love of women etc. A "Qasida" is a poem of twenty or more lines of metrical rhyme. It usually begins with a description of the place where the poet lives with his beloved. The poet then describes the happy days he spent with his beloved. After that the poet is saddened by the separation of his beloved and laments describing the memories of his beloved and her abode. Then the poet describes his personal feelings, experiences in real life and various adventures that he performed and at last the poet praises his patron hoping to get some reward from him and thus ends "Qasida".

The most important and most popular form of long odes of this period is "Muallaqa" poems. The word "Muallaqa" means "to hang" or "which is given the status of valuable thing". In pre Islamic age a twenty day trade fair was held every year at Ukaz near Makkah city. The fair reflected the social, political and literary life of the ancient Arabs. A poetry and speech recitation competition was held there and poets from the various parts of the Arab competed for the best. The seven best poems were selected by an impartial jury. To show respect and honor, these poems were written in golden letters and hung on the wall of holy Kaa'ba. Muallaqa poems are descriptive. Among all the Muallaqa poems we see the complete social picture of ancient Arabia. The main themes of the poems are courage, revenge, generosity, hospitality, heroism, greatness etc. Every tribe had its own national poet who was a hero for them. He sang the praise of his own tribe and condemned the enemy. These poems were about tribal conflict, tribal strength, condemnation of rival enemies, love, praise of the patron etc. In Muallaqa poems the poet describes his far and remote journey through the forests and sandy desert. We see the description of dangerous sandy roads of the desert, experiences of his journey, wild animals and natural scenery of that time in Muallaqa poems. The poet also praises his vehicle. Every poet begins with some beautiful erotic prelude addressing to his real or imaginary beloved and remembers his happy and joyous memories that he passed with her beloved. Remembering these past days the poet laments on the relics of her abode through which he expresses his love, affection, pride of the clan, gratitude etc. The poems also reveal the religious belief, cultures and social life of the ancient Arabs. It gives a pen-picture of the history, geography, philosophy and social life of the Arabs of that time.

### Themes of Pre-Islamic Arabic Poetry

It has been said, "Poetry is the Arabs' archive," as it serves as a reflection of the environment in which its owners lived. It mirrors various psychological aspects and the moral ideals of the Arabs. As a consequence, the themes and forms of pre-Islamic poetry were diverse. Al-Rafi'i notes: "The first to classify these forms and distinguish poetry by them was Abu Tammam, who restructured the 'Hamasah' book into ten sections: bravery, elegies, ethics, love poetry, satire, commendations, descriptions, journeys, humour, and understanding of women. Later, Abdulaziz bin Abi Al-Asbag expanded them to eighteen categories thus including love, descriptions, pride, praise, satire, reproaches, excuses, ethics, wine poetry, gift poetry, elegies, good news, congratulations, warnings, encouragement, humour, and a specific category for questions and answers."

#### 1. Satire

This genre was not very famous in pre-Islamic poetry compared to pride or love poetry, but its impact on individuals was significant, leaving deep emotional wounds. It relied on humiliating the satirised individual, stripping them of the virtues and morals their community valued. Thus, pride, praise, and satire collectively represent a spectrum of virtues and their opposites. For example, generosity was a virtue, while stinginess was its opposite; bravery contrasted with cowardice, and so on. An example of what Arabs condemned was fleeing during battles. Al-Harith ibn Hisham fled during the Battle of Badr, abandoning his brother Abu Jahl, so Hassaan ibn Thabit reproached him for it.

"If you have lied about what you told me, then you saved like Al-Harith ibn Hisham.

He abandoned his loved ones and did not defend them, escaping with just his horse's reins and bridle." Satire also targeted social relationships and psychological flaws, such as stinginess, attacking neighbours, baseness, betrayal, and neglecting honourable deeds. Ibn Bassam mentioned in Al-Dhakheera that Alkama ibn Ulaatha when he heard Al-Asha's verse:

"You sleep with full stomachs, while your neighbours go hungry, lying in agony."  
He wept and asked, "Do we do this to our neighbours?"

In Arab satire, there were two types: individual and collective, the first targeted a person, while the latter aimed at entire tribes, a poet might combine both forms. Satire in the pre-Islamic era often followed a serious tone, avoiding vulgarity and direct insults. Instead of that, it employed sarcasm, allusion, and sharp, indirect jabs.

## 2. Praise

People in the pre-Islamic era upheld high ideals and moral standards they had agreed upon and inherited from their ancestors. Praise poetry emerged as a testament to these virtues, such as sound judgment, or other commendable qualities that surfaced in their time, such as noble actions, the kindness shown, or the release of a captive. Such acts warranted acknowledgement and gratitude. Thus, praise can be defined as:

"Praise is directed at a person of significance for commendable moral virtues, such as sound judgment, chastity, justice, and courage-qualities deeply rooted in the individual and their people, enumerating their ethical merits. Praise poetry became widespread when poetry became commercialized, with poets adopting it as a profession. Among the earliest praise poets were Zuhair, Al-Nabigha, and Al-Asha."

Praise often served as a poetic record, illustrating various aspects of the lives of prominent figures, whether kings, leaders, or noble figures. Pre-Islamic poets followed two paths or both:

**Professional and Commercial Praise:** Often frequenting royal courts and the assemblies of nobles, this involved poets using their skills to gain favours, though it can border over-exaggeration and seeking financial gain. Pre. Al-Nabigha al-Dhubyani pioneered this approach, using professional praise and dedicating his

**Sincere and Emotional Praise:** This type stems from deep love and genuine emotion. It was exemplified by Zuhair ibn Abi Salma, who dedicated his poetry to all who promote reconciliation. He praised figures like Haramm ibn Sinan and Al-Harith ibn Awf for ending the long-standing war between the tribes of Abs and Dhabyan, as seen in his verse:

"He is the generous one who bestows without hesitation; and bears burdens even when asked for the impossible."

## 3. Elegy (Al-Ritha'):

Elegy and praise share a common feature of extolling and elevating an individual's status. However, elegy celebrates the deceased and their virtues, while praise honours the living, portraying their deeds and qualities. Élegy is a poetic art with fixed goals and meanings, often expressing profound emotional reactions containing grief and sorrow. This is especially evident when a family or tribe loses a cherished individual, plunging them into mourning. The poetic sentiment stirs to express shared sorrow and the glory whose foundation has crumbled, often accompanied by the enumeration of the deceased's virtues and weeping for their loss; offering consolation while urging patience, acceptance, and submission to fate.

In pre-Islamic poetry, elegy commonly focuses on those who die a natural death or are killed in events other than major wars. They do not mourn those killed in wars because they went out only to die; thus, if they weep for them, it becomes a form of satire. Amr ibn Kulthum said<sup>19</sup>: "By God, our women do not wail over the dead, nor do they raise their voices in mourning for those slain in battle."

Élegy is for those who die a natural death or are killed outside the context of historical wars, such as raids and the like. In such cases, they enumerate the virtues of the deceased and exaggerate the tragedy, as if this death is unnatural for someone worthy of living.

Élegy for these poets often cantered on relatives, as seen in Al-Muhalhil's lament for his brother Kulayb, Al-Khansa's elegy for her brothers Sakhr and Mu'awiya, and Labid's for his brother Arbad, also it can be dedicated to other prominent figures, such as Aws ibn Hajar's elegy for Fadala Al-Asadi, as it is regarded as one of the finest examples of pre-Islamic elegy. Al-Asma'i commented, "I have not heard an elegy better than": "O soul, restrain your grief; what you fear has come to pass."

If the subject of the elegy was of high status, poets sought exaggeration often involving nature in their expression of the calamity. Notable elegy poets included Al-Muhalhil ibn Rabi'ah, Durayd ibn Al-Sammah, Al-A'sha of Banu Bahilah, and Labid. Women, too, were distinguished in this art, with poets like Al-Khansa and Jalilah the wife of Kulayb.

Their elegies frequently employed specific phrases, such as the prayerful "May you not be far" or "May you not vanish." Also, prayers for rain to bless the grave often invoked phrases like "May rainwater grace your grave" or "May your thirst be relinquished by rain" to ensure the land surrounding the grave remained lush and fertile.

## 4. Love Poetry (Al-Ghazal):

Love poetry occupies the most significant portion of pre-Islamic poetry, as it resonates deeply with human emotions and connects closely to the human soul. This is due to the profound influence of women on men's lives, stirring their feelings and accompanying them through their journeys. Critics and scholars have identified four related terms often used in discussions of love poetry: Ghazal(Love poetry), Taghazzul(Flirtation), Nasib(Romantic prelude), and Tashbib (Amorous description). Some try to seek to

distinguish between Nasib and Ghazal. The difference is that Ghazal refers to the emotions one experiences in longing for women, which are then poetically expressed as Nasib. In essence, Nasib is the mention of Ghazal, while Ghazal itself represents the feeling. It is said that Ghazal is, in fact, the indulgence and infatuation with the affection of women.

One of the most prominent features of Ghazal among the pre-Islamic poets is the attachment to women, the pursuit of their affection, and the description of their physical charms. The leading poet in this regard is Imru al-Qais, spending his youth indulging in pleasure and drinking. A result of reading love poetry from this period reveals a set of standards for evaluating beauty and physical charm. Shawqi Daif explains, "They describe women in detail, describing the body and leaving almost nothing untouched—forehead, cheeks, neck, chest, eyes, mouth, saliva, wrists, legs, breasts, hair, they also describe her clothes, accessories, jewellery, perfumes, modesty, and chastity"

The poet may turn in his Ghazal to singing the praises of a woman's virtues, especially when reflecting first before the main goal. As for poetry of passion between lovers, it is widespread Ghazal is depicted as a hardship one endures due to the pangs of love. Most of those who followed this approach were known for their chastity, and their Ghazal can be considered the early foundation of the 'Udhri Ghazal (chaste love poetry) that became well-known during the Umayyad era. Each of these poets became associated with the woman he loved and became famous for, such as Antara who loved Abla, Al-Mukhabbal Al-Sa'di and Maylaa, and Abdullah ibn Al-'Ajlān, one of the famous Arab lovers who died of love, who loved Hind, and about whom he said: "I became like a madman under his weapon's blade, turning between his palms a bow and arrows" He prolonged his cry and then collapsed dying of love.

### 5. Pride (Al-Fakhr):

It is a person's praise of his qualities and those of his people, speaking of their noble deeds, virtues, noble lineage, large tribe, high status, and renowned bravery. This poetry genre is closely related to many themes of praise poetry, it deals with the same meanings as in praise poetry. A part of the reason is that life in the pre-Islamic era was characterised by constantly facing dangers, competing for water and resources, celebrating heroism, glorifying victories, boasting about numbers and strength, engaging in combat with peers, and maintaining honour and protecting neighbours. These factors sparked the creativity of the poets and provided them with reasons to be prideful. Their tongues were fluent in poetry filled with strong emotion, in which historical facts were adorned with imagination and exaggeration. This pride would sometimes be tribal, driven by an overwhelming enthusiasm, especially in moments of attack and retreat, seeking revenge, tightening the noose on enemies, and relishing death in war. Tribal pride poetry often carries strong bursts of fervour, a good example of this passionate tribal pride is the Mu'allaka of Amr ibn Kulthum, in which he recorded his tribe's victories and the courage, dignity, and pride of its members. This one Mu'allaka made him famous and stood as his only significant work, representing his abundant poetry and lofty pride. "The tribes of Maad knew that when we established camps on their plains, We are the ones who feed when able, and destroy when tested."

This exuberant enthusiasm does not prevent the poet from being fair to his enemies, acknowledging their strength and courage. This sense of justice in pre-Islamic poetry was known as **Al-Munṣifāt** (fair depictions), with notable poets such as Al-Abbas ibn Mirdas, Awf ibn Al-Ahwas, and Khadash ibn Zuhayr, who said:

"We wrestled the mighty warriors, and they wrestled with us, as fierce as tigers clashing with lions we wrestled. I have not seen the likes of them vanquished and diminished, nor those who abandoned us, honourable and noble."

At other times, pride becomes personal, stemming from souls that aspire to dignity, glory, and noble values. This form of pride is evident among a group of virtuous and chivalrous poets, such as Antarah, Hatim al-Ta'i, and the S u'luuk poets like al-Shanfara and Ta'abbat a Sharran. Poets here delight in speaking of themselves, their traits, and their virtues, particularly generosity and valour. Examples of such personal pride are found in the works of Tarfah, Labid, and Antarah, whose odes are replete with many illustrations of this individualistic pride.

### 6. Description (Wasf)

It predominates in all genres of poetry as it is a vast domain that encompasses everything that is perceived by the senses, from natural phenomena to living and inanimate objects. Poets in the pre-Islamic, who settled and travelled the deserts, became familiar with the harsh environment and what it consisted of desolate wilderness, mountains, valleys, and animals. These poets often described their journeys, narrating their arduous travels on camels back in exhaustive detail, as exemplified by Tarfah in his celebrated ode. They compared camels to palaces, their legs to columns, it was also compared to ships, bridges, and even mountains. They compare it to many animals, such as the ostrich, the bull, and the zebras, to the extent that camels especially the female came to dominate a significant portion of their long odes.

The horse was the second most mentioned in poetry, a companion in both hunting and war, enduring fatigue and hardship with them. The Arabs cherished their purebred horses, giving them unique names and preserving their lineage. Each poet had a distinct way of describing his horse, as Imru al-Qays, praised his horse in these famous lines.:

Boldly advancing, retreating, charging together, like a boulder hurled by a torrent from above. Its flanks are like those of a gazelle, its legs like those of an ostrich, its body sleek and agile like a wolf in motion.

Others spoke about horses in their poetry such as Antarah describing them in battle, Tufayl Al-Ghanawi, known for his remarkable descriptions of horses, earning him the title of **Al-Muhabbar** (the embellisher) in pre-Islamic times. As Abd Al-Malik ibn Marwan said:

“Stingy, when it is said, “Ride,” he does not say to them, Fools fearing death—where shall we go?”

Poets didn’t stop at camels and horses, they also described other animals in their environment, such as bulls, wild cows, cats, roosters, snakes, wolves, ostriches, and ravens. These descriptions were woven into their lengthy odes, the opening verses, however, were dominated by descriptions of ruins and encampments, as seen in odes and other pieces.

Pre-Islamic poets also described natural phenomena around them, such as the night, clouds, wine and its gatherings, war and weapons. These detailed depictions reflect their keen observation and their ability to describe their surroundings with simplicity, beauty, and honesty.

## 7. Wisdom

Wisdom has been a prominent feature of pre-Islamic poetry, found in the works of early poets like Imru Al-Qays and Ubayd ibn Al-Abras. Their wisdom is drawn from their environment, shaped by experiences of war and peace, ethics, and traditions. These insights reflect the purity of their instincts, the richness of their experiences, and their ability to derive lessons from events. Their wisdom also holds historical, social, and moral significance, varying across time and individuals, as it reflects their views on life, people, and the changes of time. This wisdom is often interspersed throughout their odes or presented in their conclusions. Shawqi Dayf noted that the foundation of this wisdom lies in their deep-seated ethics shaped by habit and a natural inclination for self-reflection. This formed the basis of their natural religion, no doubt they directed their wisdom in poetry towards matters related to ethics and politics, without concerning themselves with advocating any particular religious doctrine, nor did they give weight to the outward aspects of these religions in their poetry.

The Mu‘allaqat are a prime example of poems full of wisdom touching upon many themes. Such as Zuhayr’s ode, where he addresses themes of war and peace, life and death. While Tarafah’s wisdom reflects his hedonistic personality, seeking to enjoy life before encountering death unexpectedly.

Wisdom also appears in the poetry of other poets like Labid, Ubayd ibn al-Abras, and Aws ibn Hajar and others. Another example is Umayya ibn Abi al-Salt who stood out for his extensive use of wisdom relying on religious knowledge and ancient nations. His verses combined personal experience and cultural insights, encompassing religion, along with a speech on the transience of life and the dominance of fate over people.

## Conclusion

The Arabic poem, with its diverse themes and purposes, will always remain an honest reflection of life in the pre-Islamic era. And that the environment played a pivotal role in inspiring many of these varied topics. Perhaps what inspired the poet's exquisite expression and precise descriptions was the desert itself, it played a significant role in clearing the poet’s mind and planting hope despite its harsh nature. As a result, the poems emerged as refined works of considerable artistic value, earning them a prestigious status and the admiration of audiences across all eras and times.

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