

The suspended Odes of pre-Islamic era

(A brief introduction)

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Abstract: Arabic literary tradition is the richest one in all over the world so, I tried my best to take out some basic facts about pre-Islamic Odes of Arabic literature to put in front of the readers in brief.

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Introduction:

The most fascinating and arresting feature of Arabic literature are its clarity and obviousness that show the appearance and emergence of a new literary art with its full swing of progress to the most distinguishing mark of perfection which never equaled by later exponents and outcome of the same art with scarcely a hint to give warning and trembling remarks of what is about to come.

This aspect of literary innovation and element of surprise are more striking than in the first appearance of Arabic as a vehicle of literature it was when the writing was totally absent from the age of the contribution of these seven famous poets were struggling verbally to bring forward all they had at that era. At one movement Arabia found itself empty and dumb in literary activity except for some votive or professional inscriptions in a variety of dialects. At the next companies of poets sprang up all over northern Arabia reciting some complex odes which means in Arabic language “قصائد Qasaaidu” plural of “قصيدة Qaseedah” including a series of themes elaborated with unsurpassed vigor, vividness of imagination and accuracy of imagery from the four wall of the society of pre-Islamic world in an infinitely rich and highly articulated language representing little or no traces of dialect consisting of complex and flexible metrical schemes that rhyme throughout the poem.

Development of Qaseedah (Ode):

The Arabic philologists of later times shared the feeling of surprise in their writings to unveil the facts about the existence of the poetry of pre-Islamic world, the one of the earliest and the best of Arabic critics named Ibn-e-Sallam said that Arabs had no poetry other than verses spoken by some person or other at a certain occasion closely connected with some rituals of the society. Qasaaid or long poems were first recited in the time of “Abdul-Muttalib” in the first half of the sixth century. If we go through the themes and central thoughts of those Odes or long poems we found some classical classification of those verses spoken by some person or other are “Elegies” (funeral song), “laments” (mourning song), “boasting poems” (daring song), “satires” (parody song), “cursing-poems” (insulting song), “praises of horse or camel” (flattery song), “war-poems” and the like must have existed long before even if the formal appearance of these were not present but the roots were there as we observe this in so many walks of human life. Many such short pieces have come down to us from a period contemporary with the early Qasaaid and justify the assumption that they existed as separate permanent themes of occasional verse of the Qaseedah of that era. As well as the basic construction of primary ode is concerned, the loose-iambic form has been used in it which is called “rajz/rajaz” consisting of short rhyming lines as we can see in following words "ويدي ويدي", (oh my hand oh my hand) this is the very beginning line of metrical poetry of pre-Islamic period that has been discussed by great scholars.

Saj-ul-kuhhaan is the another form of poetry-like prose that has been developed from the pacing of camel (like the Carmen) which were thought to possess magical powers a conception familiar to us from the story of Balaam. But between this loose poetical form that is very common to all the Semitic literatures and then ten or twelve meters of the sixth century poetry proves that there is no visible and apparent link, and no other Semitic language has anything resembling the latter except imitation only through imitation and replication these forms have been pasted on it to lift the eloquent status of the language of that era. The exclusion of “rajaz” from the permissible meters employed in the “Qaseedah” indicates a conscious dissociation of it from the new meters came to existence according to the new rules and regulation of the pre-Islamic poetry as well as prose. Many theories have been tentatively suggested for their origin, but while it may be reasonably certain that they did not originate with the “Qaseedah” they probably do not greatly antedate it.

It would seem from all this that the “Qaseedah” represents the culmination and termination of a period of poetical experiment during which the new meters were discovered and standardized to be followed in the field of poetry. Even if we can say with assurance that the expression of a new sense of power in poetical composition, construction and formation are entirely different from the old one in the new ranges of aesthetic sensibility that were opened up by this discovery and there is no “rajaz” poem, neither in earlier nor later times but they were only using their mother-tongue power without knowing the metrical terms, that is why in so many places in relevance with the poetry, except to say “tanaafure kalimaat” in some poetical verses of that era, we are helpless to elaborate the logic of that particular construction, that can compare with the sense uplift that they give. This metrical system was, as myth in the ignorant age but these connected terms may have come from contacts with the cultures of the Fertile Crescent, even if there is no obvious evidence as yet to support the suggestion because of the huge gap between the construction of new poetic metrical system and the old mother-tongued based poetical verses, moreover we did not find any supernatural authority keeping it safe as with the revelation of the Holy Qur-aan and the safety measure of the Hadees-e-nabavi. Any way the new meters fit the structure of Arabic speech with extraordinary rightness and harmonic adjustment. From this came that astonishing outburst of poetic talent it means the existence of the poetry was there but the exact wording is doubtful, that existence has been continued spreading within a period of a few years or decades among all the tribes of Arabic speech, from Mesopotamia through Najd and Hijaz, and down into the wild ranges of “Asir, and finally into Yamen. It called out powers hitherto latent: for while the uniformity of Arabic morphology and the natural flow of the speech forms into the new metrical patterns made it easy to compose a few rhyming lines, it took a high poetical talent to expand the poem to sixty or eighty lines and to preserve throughout the same level of artistic and technical accomplishment.

Objectives of Qaseedah (Ode):

The final objectivity of the “Qaseedah” is self-praise, eulogy of the poet’s tribe, satire directed at rival groups or individuals, or panegyric of a patron. But before reaching his climax the poet seeks to build up a favorable climate of emotional reactions among his audience by a series of preliminary themes on

various aspects of Arabian life. The strangest of these to us is “naseeb” which is the conventional opening theme.

In the opening lines the poet is supposed to be travelling on a camel with one or two companions. The road leads him to the site of a former encampment of his own or a friendly tribe, the remains of which are still visible. He beseeches his companions to halt for a moment, and sorrowfully recalls how he spent here the happiest days of his life with his beloved many years ago. Now life with its constant wanderings has separated them, and over the deserted scene roams the wild antelope. The coming translation shows the basic feeling of the poet of that era.

Stay! Let us weep, while memory tries to trace
The long-lost fair one's sand-girt dwelling- place.,
Though the rude winds have swept the sandy plain,
Still some faint traces of that spot remain.
My comrades reined their coursers by my side,
And “Yield not, yield not to despair, they cried.
(Tears were my sole reply. yet what avail
Tears shed on sands, or sighs upon the gale?)

This is often called the erotic theme of the “Qaseedah”, which is in fact something quite different with the relation of the poetry of this era. It is an melancholic memories of his love its essential emotional element is the evocation of parting, and it has little in common with the love-poem or “ghazal” no example of which is to be found in what has come down to us of pre- Islamic poetry. Passage of erotic description occasionally occurs, but they are clearly distinguished from the “naseeb” theme. The “naseeb” itself has a function only in relation to the “Qaseedah” as the philologist Ibn-e Qutaiba tells us, it is introduced only “to incline the hearts of the poets hearers towards him and to call out their gripped attention, and should thus have come into existence only with the new organization of the ode. Ibn-e- Sallam, indeed, in his catalogue of reasons for the pre-eminence of Imra ul Qais, credits him with the invention of the deserted-encampment, be no doubt that the theme possessed an enduring

appeal for the Arab poet and his audience; however stereotyped its formulation in the “naseeb” of later context.

After depicting the final separation from his beloved as her tribe moves off to seek fresh pastures, the poet pursues his journey and seizes the occasion to describe, sometime briefly but often with all an expert’s enthusiasm, the fine points of his camel or horse. Its swiftness and endurance of fatigue on his long and dangerous journeys leads him to compare it to a wild ass, ostrich, or Oryx, but the comparison often seems to become submerged as the theme is developed into a lively picture of animal life or of a hunting scene, which to western taste is often the most attractive section of the poem.

She the white cow, shone there through the dark night luminous, like a pearl of deep-seas, freed from the string of it,

Thus, till morn, till day-dawn folded back night’s canopy; then she fled bewildered, sliding the feet of her.

Voice now she hears near, human tones, they startle her, though to her eye naught is: Man! he, the bane of her!

And they failed the archers. Loosed them to deal with her fine-trained hounds, the lop-eared, and slender the side of them.

These outran her lightly. Turned she swift her horns on them, like twin spears of Samhar, sharp-set the points of them.

Well she knew her danger, knew if her fence failed with them hers must be the red death. Hence her wrath’s strategy.

Only after this, as a rule, does the poet break into the subject proper of his poem. By the use of carefully selected epithets he unfolds to his audience a series of idealized portraits of tribal life, a scene of revel, or a desert thunderstorm; he extols his own bravery or defiantly pro-claims the glorious deeds of his tribe and the disgrace of its rivals or enemies; he sings the praises of his patron and lauds his generosity; in exultant tones he describes a battle or a successful raid; or he sums up the ethics of the desert in a vein of didactic pessimism. Thus, the qaasid poets incorporated into their art practically the entire repertory of subjects of the older poetry with the single exception of the elegy (funeral song). This long preserved its own traditional structure and is

remarkable also for several poetesses who excelled in it, the most celebrated being *al-Khansa of the tribe of sulaim, in west central Arabia. Her elegies for her brother Sakhar, killed in battle about 615, were famed throughout Arabia, and legend delights to display the poetess intervening in poetic tournaments at "Ukaaz" in the company of famous poets.

Theme based depiction of Qaseedah (Ode):

The "Qaseedah" once established as the acme of poetic genius, became the standard by which the quality of a poet was judged. But now there set in a second process, which is equally characteristic of Arabic literature in its later development. Once a literary form is established, it remains henceforward standardized and almost stereotyped in its main lines. The earliest poem, presumably addressed to the poet's fellow tribesmen, is loose in the choice and order of their themes and seems to have no function but to express the poet's own personality and reactions to his circumstances. But this very soon changed. One result of the development of the new poetic art was that poetry began to become a profession. At first something survived of the old conception of the *shu ara*, "kenners", as wielders of rhythmic words which exerted magical powers, and there are numerous stories of the inspirational of poets by heavenly beings or demons "jinn". The great poets, however, no longer devote themselves to extempore productions on the battlefield or other minor occasions; they reserve their powers for poetic tournaments, at seasons when different tribes come together for fairs or pilgrimages, or for recitation before the kings "Hira" and "Ghassaan" or other great chiefs. A profession requires a clientele signifies its approval not only by platonic appreciation but by tangible recompense of herds and other possessions.

Structural standard of Qaseedah (Ode):

This had a considerable effect in standardizing the structure of the "Qaseedah". To gain approval the poet had not only to play up to the tribal sense of pride or to his patron's self-importance; he was obliged even more to keep within the range of themes which his audience understood, trying to touch their feelings and captivate them by an allusive and pictorial evocation of subjects with which they were familiar and on which they were ready to back their judgment. He could not, even had he wished, strike out on fresh Paths and introduce new or wider

range of ideas; had he done so, he would have outstripped their comprehension and lost contact with them.

Another result of the development of poetry as a profession contributed also to the stereotyping of the “Qaseedah”. This was the growth of a system of apprenticeship to the new profession. A famous poet had in his train one or more acolytes, “raawees”, (reciters/narrators) who learned the productions of the poet by heart and transmitted them to others, so that they passed from mouth to mouth over a wider or narrower range of territory. Once a “raawee” had learned the technical secrets of handling the “Qaseedah” he might well become a poet on his own account, but with an almost inevitable diminution of spontaneity and substitution of conscious art. One “raawee” at least, became a greater poet than his master, namely Zahur, the “raawee” of Aws and Hajar. But it is precisely Zuhair and his school whom the Arabic philologists regarded as typical “slaves of poetry”, because of their excessive addiction to technique as against the productions of the “poets by nature”

In course of time, however, “raawee” themselves became a class of professional reciters with a wide general repertoire, and the survival of the ancient poetry for some two centuries, until its fixation in writing, was due entirely to their transmission of it. Many stories are related of the prodigious memories of certain famous “raawee” one of whom is said to have recited on one occasion 2,900 long poems at a single sitting. Such stories, however, carry their own question-marks with them. Was it really possible, given the utmost good faith of the “raawee” to preserve the authentic original texts over so long a period from errors, revisions, some polishing here or there, or (especially in view of the rather loose articulation of the Arabian ode) from omissions or misplacements? Might not reciters make mistakes over authorship, attributing poems to the wrong poet, or transferring verses with like meter and rhyme from one poem to another? Most of the old Arabian poetry relates to specific tribal events and personages and is fully intelligible only when these are known; as they passed out of living memory, the poem connected with them would either drop out of currency or be reconnected to some other traditional story-cycle and possibly remodeled to fit it. Most disturbing of all, what guarantee could there be that ambitious and jealous “raawee” might not pass off poems of their own compositions or of some obscure poet as the productions of some famous poet of the past? The philologists who collected the old poetry in the eighth century

were, however, well awake to these questions, perhaps even excessively so, to judge by the accusations of forgery freely bandied about between rival collectors and schools. A few modern critics have gone even further, and on the ground of these mutual accusations or other hypotheses have denied the genuineness of the whole body, or of all but a fraction, of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry. But this is hypercriticism. We shall see later that it would have been impossible for "raawee" of the eighth century, if they had nothing behind them but the undoubtedly genuine productions of the seventh, to have imagined the markedly different poetry of the pre-Islamic age, and to have invented all its particular local and personal diversities. While it may very seldom be possible to provide objective evidence for the authenticity of any given poem with complete certitude, nevertheless there can be no doubt that the commonly accepted nucleus of poems ascribed to the poets of the sixth century is a faithful reproduction of their poetic output and technique, and thus substantially authentic. Most, indeed, of what must have been an immense volume of poetry has perished, but what survives includes, at least, all those works which have been most highly esteemed by every generation of native critics.

At last we can say that the people of the ignorant age are fully competent in uttering their feeling with the means of words those were transferred heart by heart due to the absence of the writing from the society.

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