

THE QUR'ĀN AND POETRY

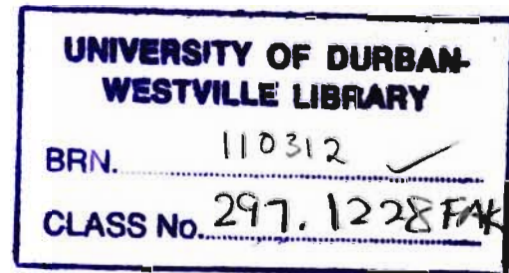
by

S.I.E. FAKROODEEN

---

Submitted in part fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of M.A. in  
the Department of Arabic, Urdu and  
Persian in the Faculty of Arts at the  
UNIVERSITY OF DURBAN-WESTVILLE

---



SUPERVISOR: PROFESSOR SYED HABIBUL HAQ NADVI

(M.A., Ph D., Harvard)

NOVEMBER 1986

T 870078

(b)

CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
SUMMARY	(c)
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	(f)
TRANSLITERATIONS	(h)
PREFACE	(j)
 <u>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION</u>	 1
(i) Western Aesthetics	
(ii) Islamic Aesthetics	
 <u>CHAPTER TWO: POETRY IN ARABIA</u>	 21
 <u>CHAPTER THREE: CENSORSHIP OF POETICS BY THE QUR'ĀN</u>	 54
 <u>CHAPTER FOUR: THE ATTITUDE OF THE PROPHET AND THE                     COMPANIONS TOWARDS POETRY</u>	 97
 CONCLUSIONS	 155
 BIBLIOGRAPHY	 162



SUMMARY

A common misunderstanding among some Orientalists, and even some erring Muslims, is the belief that aesthetics is foreign to Islam. This conclusion is made on the grounds that Islam is restricted to rituals. Aesthetics is in fact an intrinsic part of the spirit of Islam. A study of aesthetics in Islam, compared to Western aesthetics, reveals the two as independent bodies with little, if any, similarities. In Islam the foremost principle is the expression of the "Unity of Allah". Western aesthetics has naturalism as its first principle. This work involves a study of these two disciplines to show the independence of Islamic aesthetics. An attempt is made to illustrate how the central principle of "Tawḥīd" (Unity of Allah) permeates every facet of Islamic art.

The general Orientalist attitude towards Islamic aesthetics seems conflicting. This thesis discusses the factors that have been responsible for the shaping of these attitudes. Emphasis is laid on the question of choosing a set of standards of criticism in assessing a foreign culture. This work explains why a basic understanding of Arabic literary standards of criticism is a necessary precondition for a true appraisal of an Arabic literary production.

The topic "the Qurʾān and poetry" has always occupied the minds of scholars through the centuries. The "sūrah", Al Shuʿarā (XXVI), was

(d)

the locus classicus for this study. However, individuals and scholars have always been hesitant about the place of poetry in Islam, and the implications of the label "Islamic poetry". This monograph is primarily involved with these issues, with a view to explain:

- 1) The actual circumstances involving the revelation of the last few verses (V. 221-227) of Al-Shu'arā, which gives the most detailed illustration of the Qur'ān's attitude towards poetry.
- 2) The effect of the Qur'ānic verses on the field of poetic composition in the early Islamic period.
- 3) The specific attitude of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and his Companions towards poetry.
- 4) The relationship between Islam and the old Arabic poetry.

This study reveals that:

- 1) Verses 221-226 of Al-Shu'arā which amounts to an unrestrained condemnation of poets and poetry, is a direct reference to the "mushrikīn" poets whose wells of inspiration were the "shayaṭīn" and jinn.

(e)

- 2) Verse 227 of Al-Shu'arā lifted the sanction from the Muslim poets.
- 3) The early Islamic period witnessed a complete revolution in Arabic poetry. Poetry was cleansed of its harmful elements and now became subservient to fulfilling the aims of the Islamic movement.
- 4) The Prophet's attitude to poetry was simply an endorsement of the Qur'ānic one. The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) was deeply attached to the art of poetic composition.
- 5) The early Muslims were solely responsible for the preservation of the old Arabic poetry.

Poetry occupies a permanent place in Islamic literary culture. The confusion about the place of poetry in Islam can be directly attributable to scholars who have engaged in a calculated programme to distort the facts to suit their motives.

ABBREVIATIONS

A.H.	After Hijrah, the year of Prophet Mohammad's migration from Makkah to Madinah.
a.s.	<u>‘alayhis salām</u> (Peace be on him!) - an honorific title given to the Messenger of Allah.
cf.	compare
Ch.	chapter
e.g.	for example
et. al.	and others
etc.	and so forth
Ibid.	Ibidem
i.e.	that is
n.d.	not dated
p.	page
pp.	pages
p.b.u.h.	Peace be upon him! - an honorific title given to Allah's Prophet.
r.a.	<u>raḍiyallāhu ‘anhū</u> (May Allah be pleased with him!) - an honorific title given to the Prophet's Companions.

(g)

s.a.w. ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam (May Allah bless him and grant him salvation!) - an honorific title given to the Prophet.

t.a. ta‘ālā (The One that is Exalted) - an honorific title given to Allah.

viz. namely

vol. volume

Vols. volumes

(h)

LIST OF TRANSLITERATIONS

SYSTEM OF TRANSLITERATION OF ARABIC CHARACTERS

CONSONANTS

1.	ا	a	16.	ط	ṭ
2.	ب	b	17.	ظ	ẓ
3.	ت	t	18.	ع	ʿ
4.	ث	th	19.	غ	gh
5.	ج	j	20.	ف	f
6.	ح	ḥ	21.	ق	q
7.	خ	kh	22.	ك	k
8.	د	d	23.	ل	l
9.	ذ	z	24.	م	m
10.	ر	r	25.	ن	n
11.	ز	z	26.	ه	h (ه also "h")
12.	س	s	27.	و	w
13.	ش	sh	28.	ي	y
14.	ص	ṣ			
15.	ض	ḍ			

VOWELS

LONG VOWELS

ا	ā
و	ū
ي	ī

SHORT VOWELS

ا	a
و	u
ي	i



(i)

DIPHTHONGS

اَؤْ aw or au

اَئْ ay or ai

DOUBLED VOWELS

اِيِيْ iyy (final form ī)

اُوُوْ uww (final form ū)

PREFACE

The Qur'ānic attitude towards poetry has not received an in-depth study from scholars. However, there are a number of major secondary works. M. Khan in his thesis, "A critical study of the poetry of the Prophet's time and its authenticity as the source of sīrah" (M.A. thesis, Ann. Fac. Arts, 'Ain Shams University, 1967), does make a study of the influence of Qur'ānic verses on the nature of early Islamic poetry, as does the thesis of R. Asrār, "Some aspects of the earliest Islamic literature: Islamic poetry of the Mukhaḍḍrimīn" (Ph. D. thesis, University of Glasgow, 1978). The focus of attention in these works is the relation between the Qur'ānic attitude and early Islamic poetry. Hence these works have not exhausted all the sources concerning the Qur'ānic attitude towards poetry.

A common characteristic in the writings of most Western scholars is the charge that the Qur'ān (and Islam in general) categorically condemned poets and poetry. It is precisely this accusation which has prompted me to make a detailed study of the Qur'ānic attitude to poetry. In the following pages, an attempt will be made to show the sea of evidence confirming the favourable attitude of the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth towards poetry. I will concentrate on an analysis of the Islamic answer to the question: "What is the status of poetry in Islam?"

(k)

Indeed, this work would have not been possible without the special favour of Allah t.a. and the blessings of His Messenger (p.b.u.h.). The contributions of the early scholars of Ḥadīth in this regard, cannot be over-emphasised: even a single word of approval or disapproval of the Prophet's attitude to poetry, has been recorded.

I am indeed grateful to my promoter, Professor S.H.H. Nadvi, who has provided invaluable guidance in this field. The Islamic attitude towards poetry has always been one of his favourite topics. His expert knowledge in this field has greatly facilitated my task.

I am greatly indebted to the library staff at the University of Durban-Westville who were always willing to help. I wish to thank also Mr R Agjee for sacrificing much time to assist in proof-reading.

Finally, I would like to thank the members of my family whose patience, encouragement and prayer made my task a really enjoyable one.



## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

The study of aesthetics is a logical precondition towards understanding literature. The development of aesthetics in Islam began with the mission of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) in the first century A.H. The literature of this century provides the foundational principles of Islamic aesthetics. Subsequently, Islamic Arabic literature developed its own unique climate. At the same time, Western scholars continued with their attempts at arriving at the perfect theories of beauty. A brief survey of the development of aesthetics in the West may prove invaluable in emphasizing the independent development of Islamic aesthetics.

.....

## WESTERN AESTHETICS

### DEFINITION

The definition of aesthetics has always been an unsolved problem in Western literary culture. Aesthetics may be defined as the theoretical study of the arts and related types of behaviour and experience. Traditionally it was regarded as a branch of philosophy, concerned with the understanding of beauty and its manifestations in art and nature. This definition is still accepted by some writers today. In the 20th century, however, scholars are inclined to treat it as an independent science, concerned with discovering the phenomena of art and their place in human life.

### HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE VARIOUS MOVEMENTS

A study of aesthetics in this century reveals many diverse movements, the majority of which have their roots in a period of the past. Hence an insight into the historical development of the various movements, investigating both the theory of beauty and the theory of art, is indispensable towards getting a fuller understanding of modern aesthetics.

### PLATO: ART FOR LIFE'S SAKE

Aesthetics has its beginnings with Plato. Plato begins his theory of the beautiful with a series of negations: not subject to growth

and decay, not like a bodily frame etc. This negative science of beauty was counterbalanced by a theory of participation: everything is beautiful through participating in the "beautiful as such". The essential nature of beauty reveals itself to the beholder who, guided by love (eros), has ascended from the admiration of physical perfection to the discovery of inward beauty, and thereafter an ultimate vision. Plato regarded the human soul as the focal point of art and he may be rightly called the father of the movement, "Art for life's sake". Plato viewed poetry as closely linked to the erotic vision of beauty: no sober speech can compete with the words inspired by enthusiasm. The good poets, Plato affirmed in his "Ion", do not compose their poems "by art", but under divine inspiration. For Plato the good and the beautiful are aspects of one and the same thing. The good and the beautiful are merged. Such merging of the good and the beautiful is called "Kalogathia".<sup>1</sup> Its norm is constituted by the structure of the cosmos. Aesthetic judgement is derived from the harmony of the cosmos. This harmony of the cosmos arouses in man a feeling of elation. Both desire and intellect are involved in this experience. Such judgement is objective in the sense that beauty is situated in the universe, and we are all able to have the same recognition of beauty.<sup>2</sup>

### ARISTOTLE

In classical antiquity the Platonic concept of the divine spirit as a source of poetic inspiration was replaced by a new concept advanced by Aristotle. Aristotle regarded the natural talent, the ability of

the poet's sensitive mind to adopt the gesture and attitude of his fictitious characters as the source of poetic inspiration. To him poetry is composed in response to two tendencies innate in man, the instinct for:

- 1) imitation and
- 2) harmony and rhythm.

Aristotle placed most emphasis on the formal elements of a poem. About the universal character of beauty itself, he has to only reflect that it depends upon order, symmetry and definiteness.<sup>3</sup>

The tide of Platonic and Aristotelian aesthetics flowed well into the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. During this period Christian ascetism created a distrust of the arts, but thanks to St Augustine (354-430 A.D.), the aesthetic culture of ancient Greece was preserved. St. Augustine sought the principle of beauty in unity, from which its further characteristics: order, harmony and proportion were to follow. To him ultimate beauty rests with God.<sup>4</sup> In the 13th century St. Bonaventura and St. Thomas Aquinas re-affirmed this aesthetic doctrine. On the one hand beauty was held to subsist in God, on the other it was discovered through the senses. This dual conception of beauty as a perfection, both sensuous and supersensuous, originated from Augustinian Platonism.

The idea of beauty, at the same time sensuous and supersensuous, lingered on in the minds through the period of the Renaissance. In the minds of the educated, Platonism was accorded a higher status. The Classical works of ancient Greece were, however, not ignored.



The exaltation of nature was coupled with an admiration for antiquity. Yet this was to become the source of the "quarrel of Ancients and Moderns", the great theme not only of French criticism in the 17th century, but also of classicist and romantic aesthetics at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries.

#### CLASSICISM TAKES OVER FROM ROMANTICISM

Romanticism lost its sway over the minds of the educated in the 17th century. In its place was classicism, which made man the master of nature. The philosophical guidance necessary for the development of a science which made man the master of nature was provided by Descartes (1596-1650). In this dry intellectual atmosphere the French developed their classical literature, which succeeded in attaining to poetic heights by pleasing in accordance with rules. The basic ground of this theory was belief in the ultimate identity of nature and reason. For Descartes, the clarity of ideas produces the conviction of truth.<sup>5</sup> Not only that, said Boileau (1636-1711) in "L'Art poetique", but they are likewise conducive to the growth of beauty. However the forceful elegance of poetry attained by the French classicists was short-lived. The post-classic generation, encouraged by critics like Jean Baptist Dubos and Charles Batteaux, looked for the "je ne sais quoi", the unaccountable charm, as the source of poetic inspiration. Platonism was once again about to make its appearance. But first we must look at the contribution made by the Cartesians towards forming a body of aesthetic thought.



## DESCARTES AND THE POPULARITY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES

Descartes found the basis of beauty in agreeableness. "Beauty pleases" was a truism generally accepted in the 17th century. But Descartes and his followers turned this assertion around so as to read: "Whatever pleases in a certain way, is beautiful".<sup>6</sup> Pleasure was now considered the fundamental from which beauty derives. The essence of beauty was now sought in the perceiving mind. Jean Baptist Dubos and Edmund Burke were some of the many psychologists who began theorising about beauty. However, many of the psychological analyses lost sight of their object: the psychologist erroneously took human sympathy and emotion for beauty.

## KANT

The popularity of the psychological theories basing the essence of beauty in human emotions was short-lived. The educated now focussed their attention towards the analysis of philosophers to the problems of aesthetics. The leading figure in this field was Immanuel Kant. According to Kant, when we judge a thing to be beautiful, we use no conception of the thing's nature. The judgement that a thing is beautiful is "reflective", not "determinant", it is not one that appears to be forced upon us if we are to understand the thing at all, but rather one about the thing's relation to our powers of apprehension. To call a thing beautiful is really to state that what is "given" seems designed, but designed for no other purposes than to facilitate our unification of it by imagination and understanding. The beautiful

is that which is thought of as the object of a universal satisfaction apart from any conception.<sup>7</sup> Beauty, in Kant's view, became an essentially and exclusively sensuous phenomenon, though one of great spiritual significance.

#### ROMANTIC SCHOOL OF POETRY

The scheme of a universal history of artistic creation resulted in a programme for the romantic school of poetry. Romanticism was a reactionary movement during a period of more than 100 years (roughly, 1760-1870), against neo-Classicism or 18th century materialism. Romanticism was characterised by excessive subjectivity. It regarded the human soul as the very pivot of art. To the Romanticist, the true artist is one who is free from the shackles of formalism and imitation, one who pours out the ideas of the divine spirit within himself, without any restraint. Romantic styles were various. Hugo, for example, identified Romanticism with liberalism and revolt: Black with "Imagination, the Divine Vision", and Wordsworth with illumination or intuition. Yet in spite of the variant styles the Romantic poets had much in common to justify the aesthetic use of the term. Romanticists accorded art the elevated status of "Art for life's sake". Art was regarded as the very essence of life. In the 18th century the Romantic movement enjoyed much popularity in Germany. Foremost among the early Romantic philosophers that contributed towards the development of an aesthetic philosophy was Friedrich Hegel. Hegel asserted that art originates from the "absolute spiritual reality". The goal of art is the sensuous presentation of that absolute itself.<sup>8</sup>

Hence the need for truthfulness in art. The Romanticists maintained that since the human soul was a divine essence, it is therefore the best source to reveal metaphysical truths. Imagination, and not reasoning, is the barometer reflecting artistic beauty.

What makes a thing beautiful? Does beauty subsist in the object of art or in the mind? Does the use of symbol in literary works reflect beauty? Can beauty be found in surrealistic experiences? Is reasoning the sole criterion of beauty? These are some of the questions that have divided literary scholars from the time of Plato to the present day. Classicism, Romanticism, Symbolism and Surrealism are some of the various conflicting movements in Western literature today. The idea of a single literary theory of beauty in Western aesthetics can never be achieved in the present climate. A fundamental precondition towards this ideal is an association of the various literary schools submitting themselves to a single authority and principle, preferably God, the Absolute. This happens to be the first principle of Islamic aesthetics.

### ISLAMIC AESTHETICS

#### ALLAH: THE FOCAL POINT

The most dangerous element in the study of Islamic aesthetics is an approach heavily imbued with non-Islamic standards of criticism. The ultimate result of such a survey can only be negative. This shortcoming

accounts for the fact that Western scholars often experienced difficulties in appraising Islamic literature. The Islamic understanding of aesthetics is unique. The focal point of aesthetics is Allah. Allah is beautiful. The concept of beauty is linked to the Absolute, unseen Allah. Ultimate beauty rests with God alone, who is the highest measure of perfection. Hence the Muslim artist or poet aspired to reach perfection in his work.

#### THE FIRST CENTURY

In the first century A.H. the revelation of the Qur'ān laid down the first principles of literary criticism. It also highlighted a major problem in Arabic poetics- what is poetry: a lie or a truth? Qur'ānic commentators emphasised the open opposition between the sincere truthfulness of Qur'ānic verses and the lack of sincerity of the poets in their compositions. In an effort to solve the problem, literary critics devised a code of ethics proposing two contradictory statements: one in defence of poetic sincerity and truthfulness, the other advocating the poet's freedom from objective truth.<sup>9</sup> In general, the concept of poetry as a lie received acceptance in Islam and the poetic lie no longer had moral implications.

A remarkable new development was the rise of the independent love-poem ("ghazal") in the wealthy cities of Ḥijāz, using a simplified linguistic structure influenced by Ḥijāzī conversational style. This "ghazal" was of two kinds: one connected more especially with Makkah: realistic, urbane, and gay; the other, connected especially with

Madīnah: depicting and idealising love.<sup>10</sup> Poetry, without losing any of its artistic qualities, became less formal and more functional; style and content complemented and harmonised with one another. A major difference between the pre-Islamic poetry and that of the Umayyad age in general was, however, psychological. The "ghazal" of this period was based on emotion. This emotion also entered into the traditional themes, bringing them closer to the popular taste. The ethical content of poetry was greatly reduced, in spite of a limited attempt to include Qur'ānic phraseology and pious teachings. The political role of much of this poetry required the poets to play according to the whims and fancies of the host and the audience.<sup>11</sup> This is especially evident in their "naqā'id", which often displayed the debased taste and love of excitement of the masses.

#### THE SECOND CENTURY

The transition to the early 'Abbāsīd age made no dramatic changes in the tradition of Arabic poetry. Metrical system and techniques evolved within the older framework. The permissible metres and deviations were ingeniously systematised by Al-Khalīl bin Aḥmad (d.791) and strictly adhered to. In language also, the poets are as precise and meticulous in their pursuit of "arabiyyah" as their predecessors, but begin to aim at smoothness and simplicity in place of the sonority of the Beduin poets. The "qaṣīdah" now acquired a ceremonial function. The poet who presented himself at the court of the Caliphs, or of lesser authorities, was required to demonstrate his qualities by his "qaṣīdahs", and was rewarded accordingly. Since it was by their patronage that the

poet gained his livelihood, he was compelled to conform to their expectations, especially when the reward was frequently proportioned to the length of his ode.<sup>12</sup> The poetry of this period was characterised for the most part by an originality, achieved by fusing new elements with the traditional themes in such a way that the effect was almost that of a wholly new art.

Yet, for all this, the poetry of the 2nd century heralds the decline of the true poetic art and the growth of artificiality in Arabic poetry. The sublime Islamic standards of literary criticism that governed the early 1st century poets, now received little attention. A beautiful piece of poetry was one in which wit and cynicism abounded. The pursuit of wit led to a straining after verbal brilliance and originality in metaphor. This was the origin of "Badi'".

The 2nd century also saw Abu Nuwās and the other poets of the latter half of the century exemplify a new development which was soon to affect all Arabic poetry, not generally to its advantage. Hitherto the poets had learned their art exclusively by association with their predecessors. With the rise of the philological schools, they began to perfect their training by systematic instruction from and in association with the philologists. Its effect was to imbue the poets themselves with a more or less philological approach to their art and the acceptance of philological criteria of poetic merit.<sup>13</sup> This was largely responsible for the increasing formalisation of Arabic poetry in later centuries, and its degeneration, in the hands of the less gifted, to an almost mechanical recapitulation of well-worn themes with an exterior decoration of "badi'".

### THIRD TO FIFTH CENTURY

The beginning of the third century witnessed a marked decline in the aesthetic content of Arabic poetry. To a certain extent the poets became captives of their society. In his private verse the poet was no doubt free to amuse himself as he pleased, but the doctrine which finally prevailed was that his major function was to immortalise his patron by his panegyrical Qaṣīdahs.

One of the most interesting features of 3rd century poetry was the effort made to break through conventions in different ways. Abū Tammām (d. 864) tried to revive the weighty sonority of Beduin poetry and to blend it with the "badī" ornamentation of the poets of Al-'Irāq; at the same time he tried to inject his verse with more complex thoughts. His disciple, Al-Buhtūrī (d. 897), remained closer to the 'Irāqī tradition in his smoother and more polished verse. In Al-'Irāq, Ibn Al-Rūmī (d. 896) attempted to create a new introspective and analytical poetry, in which each poem develops a single theme in an organic unity. The originality of this poetry was appreciated.

From the 14th century onwards the use of "badī" had become so universal in poetry as to be a natural constituent of the finished verse. It required, however, the genius of a greater poet to blend proportionally the Arabian "qaṣīdah" of the Syrian school and the smoothness of the 'Irāqī school.<sup>14</sup> This was accomplished by Al-Mutanabbī (d. 965). For skill in construction and felicity of language, Al-Mutanabbī has no equal among the later "qaṣīd" poets.

### CONCEPT OF NAQD

One problem that remained for centuries, more out of confusion than anything else, was the concept of "naqd" (literary criticism). Right from the 3rd century the use of "badi'" was supposed to be one of the chief components of good composition, and gradually literary criticism got confused with rhetorics. This confusion prevailed right up to the end of the 19th century, and it was so acute that no literary critic could separate naqd from rhetorics, or engage in a battle to prove that rhetorics and poetics were two separate branches, and that rhetorics was only a means to an end, and not an end in itself.

### I'JĀZ AL-QUR'ĀN

The I'JĀZ AL-QUR'ĀN (miraculous uniqueness of the Qur'ān) was another issue that received great attention through the centuries. This doctrine of I'JĀZ had a notable influence on the development of literary aesthetics in all its aspects. However, this remained one of the greatest problems in literary criticism for the basic reason that Arabic poetry got involved in this affair, and throughout the Classical and Middle Ages it could not free itself from this affair. Labīd, the famous Companion, renounced poetry for the content of the Qur'ān and its elegant style was enough for him.<sup>15</sup> Many of the modern poets tried to imitate the style of the Qur'ān, and the new Islamic poets were adjudged as superior in style to pre-Islamic poets because they would win the contest against their rivals in poetic tournaments. The key question was whether the style of the Qur'ān was inimitable

*Style of Quran*



or not. The majority of the critics, like Al-Bāqillānī, confirmed the inimitability of the Qur'ān and the futility of comparing the divine style with a human one.

### LAFẒ AND MA'NĀ

The central issue in the developments of Arabic literary criticism, from its birth to the present day, was whether beauty ("jamāl") lay in poetic diction ("lafẓ"), or in idea ("ma'nā"), or in composition ("naẓm"). The critics were basically divided into two schools of thought. The first school comprised the advocates of poetic diction, who found beauty in diction. Men like Al-Jāhiz and Abū Hilāl Al-'Askarī belonged to this group. The champions of this school argued that since meaning was prevalent at all times, its presentation in authentic words was the main issue. Hence the problem of style became the main problem for literary critics. The second school held that since meaning (or idea) was infinite, and diction finite, the beauty lay in presenting ideas, and not in words. This school gave rise to the science of "Al-Bayān", a branch of rhetorics. Even the Qur'ān was used as a proof in the heated debates between the protagonists of ma'nā (meaning) and lafẓ (diction).<sup>16</sup>

Al-Bāqillānī, for example, argued that the i'jāz of the Qur'ān lay in presenting ideas. In an effort to solve the issue Ibn Rashīq adopted a conciliatory attitude and stressed that both words and meaning were inevitable sources for beauty. However, the controversy of "meaning and diction" did not end with Ibn Rashīq, but continued well into the nineteenth century.

### SCHOLASTICISM AND SUFISM

The beginning of the 12th century witnessed the triumph of two forces which were henceforth to dominate the intellectual life of the Arabs: scholasticism and sufism. Scholasticism, in particular, affected every branch of literary composition, not excluding poetry, by encouraging an intellectual tendency to standardisation on the path of both writers and readers. Originality of thought, though not stifled, reaped little reward, and was less valued than the ability to refurbish familiar themes in a more elegant manner. During this period a panegyric on the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) known as "Al-Burdah" (the mantle), composed in elaborate "badī" by the Egyptian Al-Buṣīrī (d. 1296), became and has remained one of the classics of religious poetry.<sup>17</sup> The poetic art found more expression in newer patterns of strophic poetry.

### A'JĀB

One problem which was unfortunately not overcome by both writers and critics was that many poets had a limited idea of beauty, that is they were concerned with the theory of relationship between content and form, which governed the main theory of beauty. This idea led the poets and prose writers to create surprises ("a'jāb"). The originality of a poet thus lay in this unusual treatment of a traditional theme, and abiding by established forms. It was only in the 20th century, with the appearance of Al-'Aqqād, that aesthetic problems received greater attention in Arabic poetry.

### DIRECTIVES ISSUED BY CRITICS

Throughout the span of Arabic literature, literary critics like Ibn Qutaybah, Abu Hilāl Al-'Askarī and Ibn Athīr issued directives to writers periodically, guiding them to write in a smooth and natural way. Some of them regarded the memorisation of the Qur'ān, acquiring knowledge of language, as well as the thorough knowledge of "al-balāghah" and "al-faṣāḥah", the most important branches of knowledge, as necessary conditions for the training of literary taste among the Udabā (men of letters).

### ṢĪGHAH AL-ADAB

The form of literature ("ṣīghah al-adab), concerning the mysteries of meaning ("ma'ānī"), diction ("alfāz") and style, and their psychological effects on readers, always remained a burning issue. The beauty of "dibājah" (introductory verses in a poem) and charm of diction were regarded with much esteem.

Imru' al Qays acquired greatness for he possessed all these qualities, and Zuhayr was great for his realism. Rhetorics, which was absorbed into the form of literature, had to be justified by Al-Jāḥiẓ and Al-Rōmānī, among others.

The significance of single words in poems was another perennial issue. One of the demands made on a poet was that he avoids using any word that was strange or unpleasant. Single words were supposed

to be sweet and full of elegance, for they were "like beads in a necklace". However, the beauty of single words in a composition depended on their harmonious setting. This idea led critics to write on flaws in words, for example, on their balance and syntactical arrangement.

Perhaps the most sensitive issue throughout the history of Arabic literary criticism was plagiarism ("al-sarqāt"). Literary critics discussed "beautiful and bad plagiarism" in their studies. A restatement of traditional themes brought about by improvement of words was considered "beautiful plagiarism". It was bad only, as Al-Bāqillānī determined, when it represented a simple word by word repetition without personal elaboration of the original wording.<sup>18</sup> "Ikhtirā" (invention) had a special meaning. In the literary aesthetics of poetry, originality was definitely meritorious, but not essential, and not the most important aspect in traditional poetry.

#### THE ERA OF SLAVERY

The last two centuries (1800-19 ) has witnessed the greatest decline in the content of Arabic poetry. To label this period an "era of slavery" is certainly no exaggeration, for a close study of the paths followed by various literary movements in the Arab world reveals an almost complete absence of originality. Arab men of letters simply dragged their followers into the arenas of Western literary issues.



Arab writers were basically divided into two groups: the Classicists and the Romanticists. The Arab Classicists comprised of scholars like Ṭā Hā Ḥussain and Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm, who were imbued with French values and culture, and saw beauty in form. In the eyes of the Classicists beauty in life was due to the systematic arrangement and form of the world around us. Loftly ideas could not be conveyed by weak words, and hence the stress on form and diction, even at the expense of idea.

In 1882 England captured Egypt, and this also marked the beginning of the Romantic school in Egypt. The Romanticists of Egypt were those Arabs scholars educated in England, and adherents of the English Romantic school. The Egyptian Romanticists were led by Al-'Aqqād, Al-Māzinī and Shukrī, their object was to wipe-off French Classicism in Arabic literature.<sup>19</sup> The Romanticists considered the human heart as the centre of art. They were of the view that art should emerge from the soul, and not from techniques of rhyme, metre, diction etc. These Romanticists stressed on the metaphysical nature of human life, which logic could not fully comprehend.

The nineteenth and early twentieth century witnessed the advent of the neo-Classical "qaṣīdah", the Arabic poem or ode that was written according to conventional rules, mainly that of the Abbasid period. Form and verbal play were essential conditions for good poetry. As in the case of Western literature, Romanticism, neo-Classicism, Symbolism and Surrealism are some of the major movements in Arabic literature today. A blind imitation of Western principles of literary criticism on the part of present day Arab poets, has only served to

deprive Arabic literature of its independent character. The sublime principles of Islamic aesthetics now remain a rare phenomenon in twentieth century Arabic poetry. A detailed study of the development of Arabic poetry from the Jāhiliyyah to the early Islamic period will assist the student greatly in answering the following question: How Islamic is contemporary Arabic poetry?

References:

1. M.C. Beardsley: Aesthetics, pp. 39-42.
2. Cf. B. Berenson: Aesthetics and History, introd.
3. E.F. Carritt: Philosophies of Beauty, pp. 31-33.
4. M.C. Beardsley: Aesthetics, p. 95.
5. W. Tatarkiewicz: History of Aesthetics, Vol. III, p. 330.
6. Ibid., p. 18.
7. I. Knox: The Aesthetic Theories of Kant, Hegel and Schopenhauer, pp. 64-68.
8. Ibid., pp. 94-97.
9. V. Cantarino: Arabic Poetics in the Golden Age, pp. 37-40.
10. K.A. Fariq: A History of Arabic Literature, p. 24.
11. J. Zaydān: Taʾrīkh Adab Al-Lughah Al-ʿArabiyyah, Vol. I, p. 241.
12. I. ʿAbbās: Taʾrīkh Al-Naqd Al-Adabī ʿinda Al-ʿArab, p. 43.
13. Ibid., p. 45.
14. Encyclopedia of Islam, Vol. I, p. 592.
15. M.T. Darwīsh: Fī Al-Naqd Al-Adabī ʿinda Al-ʿArab, p. 285.
16. J. Zaydān: Taʾrīkh Adab Al-Lughah Al-ʿArabiyyah, introd.
17. Encyclopedia of Islam, Vol. I, p. 595.
18. I. ʿAbbās: Taʾrīkh Al-Naqd Al-Adabī ʿinda Al-ʿArab, p. 41.
19. A.H. Al-Maslūt: Taʾrīkh Al-Adab Al-ʿArabi, p. 149.

## CHAPTER TWO

### POETRY IN ARABIA

The history of Arabic literature begins with the emergence, towards the end of the 5th century A.D., of a school of Arabic poets in N.E. Arabia and the Euphrates border, whose productions extensive pieces have survived.<sup>1</sup> The next generation of poets of this school, of whom the most brilliant was Imru'1 Qais, brought its technical and artistic methods to a high level of perfection. Their "qaṣīdahs" (odes) served as models for later generations of Arabic poets. The structure of subsequent qasidahs, almost without exception, was the same, with some differences in content and treatment of the various themes. The works of this school diffused rapidly in Arabia and the areas of Arab settlement in Syria and Mesopotamia. Consequently, imitators and practitioners were found in all parts of the Middle East. These imitators were responsible for the rise of local schools. The poets of the third generation (middle of the 6th century A.D.) represent widely diverse regions. The Arabic poets of the South generation (end of the 6th century A.D.) were drawn from all tribes and regions. With the rise of Islam Arabic poetry gained a new soul altogether.

The beginning and nature of early Arabic poetry has always been a subject of much debate throughout the history of Arabic literature. "The early Arabs (says Ibn Sallām, one of the earliest and best of Arab critics) had no poetry other than verses spoken by some person



or other on certain occasions. "Qaṣīdahs" and long poems were first recited in the time of 'Abd Al-Muṭṭalib, that is, in the first half of the sixth century. However, the traditional belief of the existence of some pre-Islamic poetry always enjoyed the support of scholars from the 1st century A.H. onwards. Most scholars are agreed that Arabic poetry began about three centuries before the coming of Islam. The verses belong to nomads of the desert, but it is not unsophisticated. What tradition ascribes to the oldest recorded poet is verse in complex metres, with a polished rhetoric and a precise, carefully managed vocabulary.<sup>2</sup> In the pre-Islamic age, poems were orally transmitted and much previous material must have been lost or absorbed into the work of later poets.

In themes and imagery the earliest Arabic poetry has a flavour that is distinctly its own. In form, the use of rhyme and metre is strictly employed. Neither technique is regularly employed in the other Near-Eastern traditions, such as the Egyptian, Babylonian, or Hebrew.<sup>3</sup> A single line runs through the entire poem, whether it has six lines or sixty; the structure of Arabic word formation is such that this can be achieved without poetic acrobatics. The metres are quantitative, being based on various sequences of long and short syllables, as in Latin or Greek.

The Bedouin had very deep ties with nature. He possessed expert knowledge of the desert and knew its horizons and sights. The desert influenced his thought and his language.<sup>4</sup> Almost everything in the

life of the pre-Islamic Arab can be attributed to the desert environment: his life-style, way of thinking, perceptions, social norms and habits were to a large extent a product of the desert.<sup>5</sup> All of these were influenced by the desert life which he lived, and by the sights which he saw.<sup>6</sup> And it is the desert which has made the Arab wholeheartedly brave, proud to the extreme, magnificent even at the point of drowning, and highly admirable to his people.

The Arab is very sensitive and has a natural tendency to be poetic. He is full of manliness, helpful, hot-blooded, angered easily, and is strong in his attachment to entertainment.<sup>7</sup> He is intelligent, and given to improvisation and impromptu speech. The Arab possessed these qualities and hence it did not take long before he became impregnated with concepts relating to his environment.<sup>8</sup> He possessed a tendency to utter something all the time. When he coined a verse, the vast vocabulary of the Arabic language assisted him. The availability of various metres made it easy for him to translate his perceptions and ideas into verse.

The Arab toiled hard to earn a living, and he was confronted with much hardship with his desolate land that was almost completely barren. He set out on his mount and acquired water from the water basin. During the pollination of the date palms he used to sing: he sang to refresh himself, and relieve his fatigued she-camel of some burden, and then incited it to move on. He used to recite verses because he believed that this music had a magical power that invigorated him. In this

fashion he accomplished his work. The words uttered by the Arab were not regarded as mere sounds, nay, they were a powerful medium to impress on his audience, and a force of attraction to anyone that was addressed by it or influenced by its music. And because of that the composer of this music was a poet, that is, a man of knowledge. In the opinion of the community, the poet possessed knowledge of magic and the supernatural.<sup>9</sup> The Arabs used to honour that music and fear it: they used to honour it because it was the embellishment of life: they feared it because it was thought to have magic and hidden poems in it. Poetry could be uttered to embarrass ones enemies: it could be used to hurl insults or revile a person. The effects of these can be seen in the piercing "hiġā" (satires) of the Arabs of the Jāhiliyyah.

Arabic poetry is the product of a distinct Arabic literary culture. Hence it is impossible for us to get a true appraisal of Arabic poetry without understanding the definition of poetry as proposed by Arab men of letters. Ibn Qutaibah (d. 889), in a frequently quoted passage of his encyclopedic work "Uyūn Al-Akḥbār", left a remarkable definition of poetry:

poetry is the mine of knowledge of the Arabs and the book of their wisdom, the archives of their history, the reservoir of their epic days, the wall that defends their exploits, the impassable trench that preserves their glories, the impartial witness for the Day of Judgement. Whoever cannot offer even a single verse in defence of his honour and the noble virtues and praiseworthy actions that he claims for his ancestry will exert himself in vain, even if they were gigantic. But he who bound them together with the rhyme of a poem, reinforced them with its rhythm, and made them famous with a rare verse, a popular proverb, and a fine concept, delivered them unbelief, and put them above the deceptions of enemies and made the envious lower his eyes in shame.<sup>10</sup>

Doubt has been cast upon the poems which have come down to us from the pre-Islamic epoch: these have sometimes been considered as mere fabrication. It would therefore be advisable for us, before studying the poetry of the pre-Islamic period, to verify its authenticity.

The survival of ancient poetry was due almost entirely to the transmission of "ruwāh" (reciters). In the course of time these "ruwāh" became a class of professional reciters with a wide general repertoire. Many stories are related of the prodigious memories of certain famous "ruwāh", one of whom is said to have recited on one occasion 2 900 long poems at a single sitting. Such stories lead scholars of later centuries to have much doubt about the authenticity of pre-Islamic poetry. The philologists who collected the old poetry in the eighth century were, however, well aware of the problem of authenticity. 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 poetry.

That a certain amount of fabrication took place in the eighth century, is an assertion supported by many scholars. A number of possible motives for forgery may be cited. The resettlement of the conquering Muslim tribesmen in Syria and 'Irāq brought about tribal realignments and sparked constant political struggles among factions, in which poetry, especially in the form of panegyric and satire, was a weapon. For a greater impact, contemporary propaganda was frequently cast in the mold of a judgement handed down by the ancients. Some pieces of difficult verse may simply be the work of philologists who had despaired of

authentic citations to clarify an odd, rare word, but who were nevertheless resolved to explain the word using supposed pre-Islamic verses.

This question of forgery has already been broached by the Muslim scholars of the early 'Abbāsīd age (i.e. between 750 and 900 A.D.) who suspected the truthfulness of some eminent reciters and antiquarians, particularly Ḥammād Al-Rāwīyah (95 - 155 A.H., 714 - 772 A.D.) and Khalaf Al-Aḥmar (? - 180 A.H., ? - 796 A.D.) who, the scholars admitted, circulated forgeries of their own as ancient poems.<sup>12</sup> Moreover Al-Mufaddal Al-Ḍabbī (? - 168 A.H., ? 784 A.H.) who was one of the first and most important anthologists of Arabic verse, declared that Ḥammād had corrupted poetry beyond the point of recovery.<sup>13</sup> Of recent, Ṭāhā Ḥussain in his book "Fī Shīr Al-Jāhili" recorded that religious motives had contributed to the forging of so-called pre-Islamic poems. He accused the early Muslims of engaging in literary fraud. Stressing the scientific character of his investigation, Ṭāhā Ḥussain first observed that reputedly Jāhili poetry did not reflect the linguistic differences that prevailed in Arabia before Islam united it, or the kind of life described in the Qur'ān. He then formulated the hypothesis that it was forged, and suggested a number of motives why it might have been: claims made by or for Islam had to be substantiated; rival nations like the Persians and the Arabs projected their disputes into the past; the popular taste for stories created a demand for verses with which legendary tales were embellished; and some of the "ruwāh" who supplied scholars with material for linguistic studies are

known to have been unscrupulous forgers.<sup>14</sup> Next, Ṭāhā Ḥussain examined extant Jāhilī poetry in the light of his hypothesis, exposed the absurdity of the legends attached to it, pointed out inconsistencies of language, style and ideas with conditions that might be presumed to have existed in a backward and disunited Arabia, and concluded that with the exception of a few lines from the Mu‘allaqah of Ṭarafah which may have been composed by some unidentifiable pre-Islamic Arab, the only poems that cannot be rejected out of hand are those ascribed to poets contemporaneous with the Prophet and belonging to Muḍar, i.e. to the tribes most closely related to the Quraysh, although even those are not above suspicion.

Yet, in spite of all the fabrication, interpolation and dislocation which admittedly occurred in the process of transmission of pre-Islamic poetry, and of which all Muslim scholars are fully aware, these scholars did not go so far as to reject that poetry as basically spurious. They were fairly certain that eminent antiquarians and literary men were capable of distinguishing between genuine poetry and forgery. Much of the charges against Jāhilī poetry is hypercriticism. It would have been impossible for "ruwāh" 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. Besides, some of the great collections were thought quite trustworthy in the Middle Ages, and there is little reason to doubt their basic authenticity now. Chief among these is

Al-Mufaḍḍal's anthology, the "Mufaḍḍaliyāt". A recent study of the collection known as the "Muʿallaqāt" has improved its claim to legitimate descent.<sup>15</sup>

In Europe the genuiness of pre-Islamic poetry was discussed first by Hengstenberg,<sup>16</sup> Noldeke, Ahlwardt, René, and Basset, sustained by Sir Charles J. Lyall but discarded by D.S. Margoliouth. The most exciting controversy it aroused has had strong repercussions in the Arab countries where it was subjected to similar controversial discussions which were by no means less stimulating and in which Dr Ṭāhā Ḥussain took part with M. Sadiq Al-Rafi, M. Gumrāwī, M. Khidr Ḥussain, F. Wajdi, M.L. Jumʿa and M. Al-Khudarī. In their discussions almost all the points of contention set forth by the European scholars were examined, but with more stress on the details.

Sir Charles Lyall adds to all these arguments a very convincing one. He lays emphasis on the fact that ancient poetry is presupposed by the poetry of the first age under Islam. The famous poets of the first century carried on with many of the traditions of the poets of the pre-Islamic period, and the last class of the former were living and producing while the scholars were at work collecting and recording.

From the above-mentioned, it is pretty obvious that Ṭāhā Ḥussain's criticism of Jāhilī poetry is the most vehement. It must be admitted that he carries his conclusions beyond the point warranted by his

evidence. This can be clearly seen in his attempt to discredit the whole of the poetry ascribed to Rabī'ah. Ṭāhā denies the authenticity of an ode by 'Amr Bin Kulthūm mainly because it is too facile and smooth in expression,<sup>17</sup> yet when he comes across another ode by Al-Ḥārith Bin Ḥillizah which presents the opposite characteristics, he dismisses it also, explaining that "all it amounts to is forgers, like the poets themselves, varied in strength and weakness, in violence and mildness."<sup>18</sup>

While it may quite often be not possible to provide objective evidence for the authenticity of a specific poem with complete certitude, nevertheless there can be no doubt that the commonly accepted nucleus of poems ascribed to the poets of the fifth and sixth centuries is a faithful reproduction of their poetic output and technique, and thus substantially authentic.

It is plainly evident that there existed a body of genuine pre-Islamic poetry; poetry, which for many centuries, was regarded as the standard of classical Arabic poetry. Now there were many factors that brought about perfection and maturity in this poetry. The dialect of the Quraysh now dominated over the other Arabic dialects, and it became the language of the poets of all tribes. The Arabs discovered many feet and metres, which facilitated poetic compositions.<sup>19</sup> There were many social and political happenings that had their repercussions on rhetoric in the Arabian peninsula. The minds were nourished; the perceptions were reinforced; the imagination of the Arabs became



fertile, their journeys to neighbouring countries increased, consequently their vision of life improved and penetrated deep into the interiors of the pagan Arabian peninsula. Christian and Jewish learning increased and the material life of the Arabs improved in some respects.

One surprising feature that was conducive to the development of poetry were the many wars during the Jāhiliyyah. The movement for the independence of Ḥijāz and Najd from Yaman towards the end of the 5th century A.D. also affected poetry. This dangerous political uprising had a stimulating effect on their poetry. The Abyssinian withdrawal during the War of Makkah also inspired many towards poetry. There were many flare-ups in the wars of the Quraysh to free themselves from the Qaḥṭānids, for example, the War of Asad and Kindah; or the fights among the 'Adnānids; the wars in Rub' Al-Khālī and Muḍar, especially the battles of Al-Basūs, Dāhis and Al-Gubrā. This life stirred the Arabs, influenced their feelings and activated their minds. This hostile atmosphere was conducive to the growth of 'ḥamasah' (zealous) and boastful poetry.

The knight poets used to compete with each other about their feats during the wars and they mentioned these feats in their poetry, poetry that invited towards chivalry and love.<sup>20</sup>

One would digress too far from the topic in attempting to explain the social organisation of the Arabic tribes. It should suffice to point

out that the terms "Sayyid" and "Amīr", commonly used to designate the tribe's chief and leader, seem to have been used as appellatives of the orator able to defend successfully in a dispute the rights of his tribe. Often the leader received the names of "khaṭīb" (orator) and "zā'im (spokesman) because his personal eloquence was one of his most needed and highly appreciated virtues, more important even than his personal bravery. Each tribe and clan had a "khaṭīb", "zā'im", "mutakallim" (speaker), or "qawwāl" (eloquent man) in charge of debating and solving general as well as individual problems in the "Majlis".

The "Majlis" or "Nādi" was the primitive parliament of the tribe where the "Sayyid" (chief) often had to defend his position with the eloquence of his words. The importance accorded to the spoken word and to the most eloquent members of the tribe was also as a result of the fairly democratic structure of the primitive tribal society of the Arabs.

The same importance seems to have been granted to the spoken word in the relations between tribes. There, not only clarity and eloquence of speech was appreciated, but perhaps even more, a sharpness of tongue and the ability of defend one's own rights or those of one's tribe.

The eloquence referred to by historians and literary critics is mostly in poetic form. Al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 869), in his rhetorical work "Al-Bayān wa Al-Tabyīn", which was primarily concerned with extolling Arabic

eloquence, quotes poetic excerpts as examples. Most of the "orators" named by him are poets. Also the grammarian Al-Aṣma'ī (d. 830) gives the appellative "faṣīḥ", eloquent orator, to the majority of poets whom he quotes. Thābit Ibn Jābir, of the most famous poets of pre-Islamic times, says that he himself is:

carrier of banners, member of councils,  
sharp and eloquent orator, indefatigable pilgrim<sup>21</sup>

The forums in which the poet showed his skills were the annual fairs, often used as poetic tournaments, or the more partisan gatherings of the members of his own tribe.<sup>22</sup> In any event, the essential aspect of both panegyric and diatribe was the impact they created on the audience. Rhythmic metre and rhyme, which at this time had already matured to a remarkable degree, were considered as mnemonic means to achieve more lasting remembrance and rapid dissemination. Rapid diffusion and long durability were the bases of fame for the poet and the major aims of poetry. These characteristics were quite often referred to in early compositions, as in the following verse by an anonymous poet:

To the wind, I'll send my poem  
constant pilgrim, against my slanderer.<sup>23</sup>

Poetic vision was thus reduced to the type of expression and formulation able to achieve the fundamental aim of poetry, namely, easy diffusion. This aspect has its basis in the famous proverb, "ash - shi'r asyar", "poetry goes further".

One point worth noting is that poetry is a mine of information dealing with Arabs, their history and wisdom, their literature, their songs. It is plainly apparent that poetry itself was considered "the greatest of all Arabic studies". This underlies the importance accorded to poetry in comparison to any other means of expression as one of the greatest sources for the study of the various disciplines of Islam.<sup>14</sup> This view has been endorsed by both the Muslim masses and literary critics through the centuries.

However, one of the results of the development of poetry was that it became a profession. At first, the old conception of the "Shu'arā", as wielders of rhythmic words which exerted magical powers, received much support. There are numerous stories of the inspiration of poets by heavenly beings of Jinn. The great poets, however, no longer devoted themselves to extempore recitals on the battlefields or other minor occasions; they reserved their powers for poetic tournaments, at seasons when different tribes came together for fares or pilgrimages, or for recitation before the kings of Ḥīra and Ghassān, or other chiefs. The clientèle signified their appreciation not only by verbal praise but also by bestowing expensive gifts, money and herds.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps the most important purpose of the poet was to stimulate the imaginative response of his audience so that the poem becomes a dialogue between them, a dialogue in which the audience are alert to grasp the hints and allusions contained within the confines of his verse and to complete his thought for themselves. A beautiful

illustration of this can be seen in the following lines of a panegyric by Nābighah, in praise of the Ghassānid prince of Transjordan:

No fault in them but that their sword-blades  
Are notched from beating on the mailed squadrons.<sup>26</sup>

Poetry was the single, beautiful art which nourished the minds and affected the natural disposition of the Arabs: the Arabs concerned themselves seriously about it, they loved and marvelled at it, their estimation of poetry increased, so great was the status it occupied that the Arabs even had some of the best poems hung on the curtains of the Ka'bah.<sup>27</sup> This elevated status of poetry created a sense of pride and respect in the Arabs.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, they were inspired by poetry, in poetry was recorded the history of their nation, the glorious deeds of their ancestors and the hazards of their days.<sup>29</sup> They defended their characteristics and noble descent by means of poetry. Poetry, said the later philologists, was "the dīwān of the Arabs"; it prescribed the collective memory of the past and added more meaning to the fleeting present.<sup>30</sup> The pre-Islamic Arabs used poetry to record their glories and the shortcomings of their enemies, never failing to make maximum use of exaggeration. The functions of poetry were like those of our present-day newspapers. The following statement is undoubtedly true: Whatever information we have of the pre-Islamic Arabs, their beliefs, their religious practices, their habits, their literary taste - all these have been preserved by their poetry. And their saying: "Poetry is the "dīwān" (register) of the Arabs", is definitely true.

In the Arabian peninsula, urbanised commercial centres existed, and at its borders Arab vassals of the Sassānids held court at Ḥīrā, near the Euphrates. Nevertheless, the desert was a true platform for poetry in the pre-Islamic period, and the life of the bedouin tribe provided the subject matter. A poet was the pride and ornament of his people, for he alone would preserve the fame of their noble deeds, dignify the memory of their dead, and deride their enemies in songs of mockery. These functions of poetry determine the major genres.<sup>31</sup>

Professional transmitters had the job of memorising and disseminating great quantities of verse. Sometimes the transmitter seems to be a kind of apprentice to the poet; learning the craft of verse-making in a teacher's workshop, and later becoming a poet in his own right. In some cases, the original poem changed at the transmitter's hands.

However, those poems were not merely recited; they were put to music. And this melody was sung with various objectives: in the description of one's beloved; at the stopping at an old encampment; in the description of a desert animal or the desert scenery; and in fighting. In poetry the satire was used to great effect to circulate propaganda and sow disputes between tribes. Poetry was said to have caused the poets to have influence over the evil spirits and it used to give them control over the Jinn.

Pre-Islamic poetry can be divided into two groups: poems that focus on a single subject; and others that join together a number of disparate, loosely connected themes. The complex poem - the "qaṣīdah" - is

usually more organised, describable and predictable than the simple composition. The single poem often narrates specific events; the "qaṣīdah" tends to use a sequence of set ideas picked from a small range of themes.<sup>32</sup>

One common distinguishing trait among the pre-Islamic poets was that they favoured realism to the abstract in their poetry. Their role in society forced them more often than not to centre their compositions on concrete events and problems. The social aims the poet was expected to serve required him to develop the poetic genres more related to those aims, namely, the panegyric and diatribe, which thus became the most generally known and frequently used forms of Arabic poetry at this time.<sup>33</sup> Very closely related to these are the other topics popular in pre-Islamic poetry: praise of bravery, wisdom of life, good behaviour, and elegies for the dead, all of which later anthologists considered as specific poetic types.

The development of pre-Islamic poetry is essentially a development of the "qaṣīdah" (ode). However, not much is known of the pre-history of the "qaṣīdah". There can be no doubt that the poets of this school were supported by a long chain of predecessors, who perfected its diverse metrical systems and who laid the foundations of the special literary medium and of the artistic means utilised by them. It seems quite certain that the "qaṣīdah" constituted a new departure in Arabic poetic art, consisting of the combination of a number of existing

themes of Arabic poetry into a related pattern, and that such a pattern, once established by the end of the 6th century A.D., became a model for future generations of poets.<sup>34</sup> The "qaṣīdah" was regarded as the supreme piece of poetry because of its combination of different subjects. The "qaṣīdah", in fact, provided the supreme test by which the poetic powers were judged.

It is difficult to draw up a blueprint of themes and sequences that will account for all "qaṣīdahs". But an outline may be pieced together - fairly rigid for the first half of the qaṣīdah, more flexible for the second - that can be observed in most texts.

The absorption of the pre-Islamic poet with temporal things may be easily traced in his odes. It may also explain many things in his poems, particularly the following point which often puzzles the reader of pre-Islamic poetry. The poet usually starts his ode with an amatory prelude, "nasīb", in which he sings the praise of his beloved. The poet conjures up pleasurable or melancholy moments of the past love affair. He recollects the lazy and short days spent with her in the perpetual solitude of the desert. He gives a beautiful picture of his short romance. Yet, when we expect him to continue with his sentimental outpouring, he suddenly stops to say that all this belongs to the past, to the period of "ṣībā", or youthful and foolish conduct, that he must forget all about it, and that it is now more fitting to talk about riding or hunting or begin an eulogy or satire etc.



This unexpected change of mind is due largely to the fact that the poet was not prepared to dwell solely on the events of an everfading past. One of the more important purposes of the "nasīb" is to give a very attractive picture of love and youth to attract the listeners' attention.<sup>35</sup> Ibn Rashīq emphasises the need for a high standard in the "nasīb", saying that whoever strikes the right chord of "nasīb" "has indeed entered from the door, and placed his foot in the stirrup".<sup>36</sup> Once this is captured, the poet portrays the more serious part of life which is strife, struggle, war and survival of the tribe.

When the pre-Islamic poet portrayed the beauty of his beloved he gave a realistic picture of her, but he put stress on the sweetness of her kiss, the brightness of her face (in darkness), the charm of her conversation, her fragrance and the fullness of her hips and the pleasure that she was able to give her lover in the joy of physical union.<sup>37</sup>

To highlight how objectiveness and subjectiveness were mixed up in the exotic prelude of the pre-Islamic 'qaṣīdah', we give the following quotation, an extract from Ṭarafah's Mu'allaqah:

Alas for the dark-lipped one, the maid of the topazes, hardly yet  
grown a woman, sweet fruit-picking loiterer.

I see her mouth-slit smiling, her teeth, - nay, a camomile,  
white on the white sand booming and moist with the  
night-showers

Sun-steeped it is, pure argent, white all but the lips of her,  
these are too darkly painted to shrink from the  
sun-burning.<sup>38</sup>

From the afore-mentioned it is clearly evident that the love poetry in the *nasīb* was essentially poetry of the senses. Admiration of ones beloved revolves around the description of her eyes, lips, teeth etc. There is an almost complete absence of verses pertaining to the soul and the world of the imagination. Unfortunately, this trend in the exotic prelude was to continue for many centuries.

The "*takhalluṣ*" (disengagement) forms the second section of the "*qaṣīdah*", in which the poet makes his way out of the "*nasīb*" towards the main motive for his "*qaṣīdah*". This may be achieved by means of describing the points of a riding-camel and a journey to reach the loved one in the distant place where she is, or to console himself and forget her in pursuing some other serious purpose, or to desert her just as she has done him. However, not all pre-Islamic odes contained a "*takhalluṣ*". Zuhayr (in his "*Mu'allaqah*"), for example, moves directly from describing his lover's travelling caravan to praise of his patrons.

So far as the themes of the main part of the "*qaṣīdah*" are concerned, undoubtedly most of these were already the subjects of those "verses spoken by some person or other".<sup>30</sup> Elegies, laments, boasting-poems, satires or cursing poems, praise of horse or camel, war-poems and the like, must have existed long before. The love theme ("*ghazal*") is dominant. As in the case of the "*nasīb*", the main theme is elaborated by the introduction of idealised pictures of Bedouin hospitality or drinking, thunderstorms, war and battle scenes, and

satire of rivals. The whole poem runs from 60 to 100 lines in length, being composed throughout in the same metre ending in the same rhyming syllable.

But the problem of the metre is more complicated. The old Arabic primitive metre was a loose rambic form called "rajaz", consisting of short rhyming lines. With the development of the "qaṣīdah" the "rajaz" was excluded from the range of permissible metres.

It appears from all this that the "qaṣīdah" symbolises the climax of a period of poetical experiment, during which the new metres were discovered and standardised. The new metres fitted the structure of Arabic speech with remarkable harmony. Consequently, there was a remarkable outburst of poetic talent, spreading within a period of a few decades among all Arabic speaking tribes, from Mesopotamia to Yemen. Latent powers now became manifest; for while the regularity of Arabic morphology and the easy flow of the speech forms made it easy to compose a few rhyming verses, it took great poetical talent to expand the poem to sixty or eighty lines and to preserve throughout the same level of artistic achievement.

40

While the poet relied heavily on his innate poetic talent to compose a good composition, he was quite restricted. The audience played a very important role in standardising the structure of the "qaṣīdah". The poet had not only to incite tribal pride or stress his patrons self-importance; he was compelled to keep within the range of themes which

his audience understood, trying to evoke their feelings and captivate them by a stunning picture of subjects with which they were familiar and on which they were ready to support their judgement.<sup>41</sup> Had the poet attempted to introduce a new or wider range of ideas, he would have outstripped their understanding and lost contact with them.

One of the resultant effects of the development of poetry as a profession was the stereotyping of the 'qaṣīdah'. This was the growth of a system of apprenticeship to the new profession. A prominent poet had in his train one or more "rāwis", "reciters", who learned his productions by heart and transmitted them to others, so that they passed from mouth to mouth over a greater range of territory. Once a "rāwī" had learned the technical skills of handling the "qaṣīdah", he might well become a poet on his own account. Obviously, he would not have been as spontaneous as his master. One "rāwī", at least, became a greater poet (in the eyes of the masses) than his master, namely Zuhair, the "rāwī" of Aws Bin Ḥajar. However, many Arabic philologists held a lower estimation of Zuhair and his followers because they were typical "slaves of poetry", dependent on their addiction to technique as against the compositions of the "poets by nature".

The "qaṣīd" poets also reflected certain linguistic and aesthetic features which were to dominate all later Arabic poetry. Most important of these is verbal concision. Metaphors are restricted to a few traditional images, mainly relating to war and feasting; similes, on the other hand, are extensively used to enhance the imaginative

content of a descriptive passage. The most fully developed sections are usually those devoted to descriptions of animals, which are strikingly realistic. Throughout, the poet appeals to the hearer's eye. A good piece of poetry was one in which the poet was successful in portraying a concrete visual image. The content of most poems were known in advance. The entire emotional response was determined by form. Form therefore acquired supreme status; the content was merely the medium to focus the excellence of form. However, this formal excellence could not be achieved without an intelligent use of the poet's imagination. Excessive elaboration of any theme was, in general, avoided, except for a limited range of accepted exaggerations in boasting and panegyric.

From the above, it may appear that all pre-Islamic poetry was stereotyped and there existed little difference in poems. This is definitely not the case. One need not look further than the famous collection called the "Mu'allaqāt",<sup>42</sup> an anthology of seven "Golden Odes" made by a "rāwī" of the eight century, to which three other odes are commonly added.<sup>43</sup> The ten poems are by the masters of pre-Islamic poetry, and each is regarded as its author's masterpiece.<sup>44</sup> No two of them are alike, and only one is an outright panegyric, that of Zuhair, most of whose collection is devoted to the praise of two chiefs for composing a feud. The "mu'allaqah" of his fellow tribesman Nābighah, is an apology mingled with panegyric addressed to the king of the Arab state of Ḥīrā on the Euphrates, of whom he was the court poet for a short period.

Two other poems are addressed to an earlier king of Ḥirā, by poets of rival tribal groups. 'Amr Ibn Kulthūm, the spokesman of the tribe of Taghlīb, who ranged the north-eastern quarter of the Syrian desert, presents a defiant expression of tribal pride:

With what intent, O 'Amr son of Hind, do you scorn us,  
 and follow the whim of those who embroider against us?  
 With what intent, O 'Amr son of Hind, are we to be made  
 domestics under the thumb of your little kinglet?  
 Be sparing in menace, do gently with threats against us -  
 when, pray, did we come to be your mother's minions?  
 Our spearshafts, O 'Amr, are tough, and have foiled the efforts  
 of enemies before your time to cause them to bend.<sup>45</sup>

The poem of his rival, Al-Ḥārith Ibn Ḥillizah of the tribe of Bakr on the lower Euphrates, is a fairly successful combination of boasting and satire. This poem is essentially full of praise towards King 'Amr Ibn Hind.

The remainder are mainly poems of self-praise. First, in the opinion of many critics, in poetic merit is the mu'allaqah of Imru' al Qais, the exiled son of the ruler of a north-Arabian kingdom. His poem is completely self-centred, and noted for its love passages and natural descriptions, including a beautiful picture of a thunderstorm.<sup>46</sup>

This self-centredness is also found in the poems of 'Antarah, slave-born hero of the tribe of 'Abs, who was in the habit of boasting of his skills in the battlefield. This trait is also visible in the Bakrite Ṭarafah, who was mainly concerned with the five points of his she-camel and his skill in the tavern.

The two latest, Labīd and Al-A'shā, belonged to the last generation of pre-Islamic poets. It was at about this time that the "qaṣīdah" became standardised, in respect of techniques and themes. Labid specialised in scenes of animal life, while Al-A'shā's favourite topic was love and drinking. Both poets boasted of their own exploits and that of their tribes.

While the contents of a poem were to a large extent determined by the dictates of the audience, the pre-Islamic poet took it as a liberty upon himself to indulge in the exultation of his personal qualities and his own deeds and experience, in his ode. He was very proud of himself, proud even when he talked of his lost love. In the erotic "nasīb", we sometimes find points which compel us to believe that he was boasting while talking about his love, especially when he celebrated the beauty of the women-captives taken away by him and his own people from a defeated enemy-tribe, or when he bragged of having been able to seduce married women or capture the fancy of naive virgins etc. Imru' al Qais ended an account of a night - visit to his beloved saying:

That night I was very much loved by her,  
while her husband became disquiet and suspicious.<sup>47</sup>

The poet praises not only his beloved or camel, but boasts about himself at great lengths, often reducing his verse to sheer exaggeration. Al-Nābighah, for example, estimates himself in the following verse:

مُلُوكَ وَإِنِّى إِذَا مَا أَتَيْتِهِمْ أَهْجَمُ نِىْ أَمْوَالِهِمْ وَأَقْرَبُ

Kings and brothers-whenever I come to them I would be given  
control of their wealth and advanced in favour.<sup>48</sup>

Altogether, some hundreds of "qaṣīdah's" have come down to us, more or less authenticated.<sup>49</sup> In addition to the "dīwans" of the ten poets of the "Mu'allaqāt" and of several others, there existed another collection contemporary with the "Mu'allaqāt" and named after its compiler (the philogogist Al-Mufaḍḍal), the "Mufaḍḍaliyāt". This collection contains about 120 odes and fragments, mainly from lesser pre-Islamic poets, and there are several other collections of less time. Although the "qaṣīdah" represents the climax of the poetic art in Arabia, it was by no means the only form of poetry. Alongside it there existed a vast collection of shorter poems, elegies, inpromptus, etc. Most of these have come down in anthologies of excerpts, the most reputed being the Dīwān-Ḥamāsah (Poems of bravery), compiled by Abū Tammām, a famous poet of the ninth century.

One of the more favoured types of Jāhili poetry, especially among the professionals, was the eulogy. The eulogy was generally addressed to kings and tribal leaders, often encouraging them into battle. An example of this can be seen in the following verses which are part of a poem by Al-Nābighah, addressed to Al-Nu'man Ibn Al-Munzir, last of the Lakhmid rulers of Al-Ḥirā (reigned 580-602 A.D.):

فَأَنْتَ تَحْسُ وَالْمُلُوكَ كَوَاكِبُ	إِذَا طَلَعْتَ لَمْ يَبْدَ مِنْكَ نَوَكِبُ
فَلَا تَتْرَكْنِي بِالْوَعِيدِ كَأَنْبِي	إِلَى النَّاسِ مَطْلَبِي بِهِ الْقَادِرُ جَرِي
أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ أَعْطَاكَ سُوْرَةَ	تَرَى كُلَّ مَلِكٍ دُونَهَا بِتَزْبِزْبُ



For you are (as) a sun, and the (other) kings are stars; when  
(your sun) rises, not one star appears from amongst them.

So do not leave me with a threat, as though I were to other men  
(as) one smeared with pitch, a scabby (camel).

Do you not see that God has given you great might, (so that) you  
see every king quivering before it?<sup>50</sup>

Strange significance was attached to the satire (hijā), in which the old conception of the poet as the mouthpiece of supernatural forces still remained.<sup>51</sup> Words were regarded as having mystical and magical power. Poetry was a source of pride; and the poet who, by skilful use of imagery in taut phrases, could play upon the emotions of his hearers, was not merely praised as an artist but celebrated as the protector and guarantor of the honour of the tribe and a dangerous weapon against its enemies. Tribal contests were fought out on the battlefield as well as respective poets taunting each other ("mufākharah"). The Arabs were strongly inclined to the satire and even used it against chiefs and tribal elders.<sup>52</sup>

One must be aware of the fact that there is still another type of composition, narrative poetry. 'Adī Bin Zaid, Al - Nābighah and Al-A' = shā have tried their skill in this field - but on widely different matters. This narrative poetry impressed many literary critics. Ibn Ṭabā Ṭabā, for example, who had a marked distaste for large quotations, seems to be very impressed by the ballad composed by Al-A' shā. Above all, he praises the fact that nothing is artificial and nothing is missing from the tale.<sup>53</sup>

The pre-Islamic poet also reached heights in poetry mourning the dead. The poetess Al- Khansā, for example, portrays a beautiful picture of permanence by means of effective use of imagery, on mourning the death of her brother Ṣakhr:

So I shall weep for you, so long as the ringdove laments  
and the night stars shine for the night traveller,

And I shall never make peace with a people with whom you  
were at war, not till the black cooking-pot of the (good) host  
becomes white! <sup>54</sup>

A striking feature is the almost total absence of love-poetry (apart from the "nasīb"). Wine songs ("khamariyyah") and hunting-poems ("Ṭardiyyah") are rare. There seemed to be some structural and thematic differences in the productions of the urban poets, as compared to the rural ones,<sup>55</sup> but little of these have come down to us except some of the drinking-songs and religious poetry of 'Adī Bin Zayd of Ḥīrā, and the religious poems ascribed to Umayyah Bin Abī Al-Ṣalt of Ṭā'if.

The professional poet acting as a propagandist for gain is said to have appeared during the last phase of the pre-Islamic period.<sup>56</sup>

Al-Nābighah is said to have lost some of his tribal honour among his people, Banu Dubyān, because he accepted gifts of kings for his eulogies. Al-A'ṣhā gained prestige because of his position as a peripatetic professional propagandist, travelling from one patron to another, offering himself as arbiter.

The early attempts at Arabic literary criticism ("naqd") were simple and primitive: it began at festivals, market places and large assemblies. The most famous of these venues were the fairs at 'Ukāz.<sup>57</sup> At the various celebrations the Arabs exchanged useful commodities and recited verses to each other, competing in excellence. During these sessions the eloquent chiefs used to criticise their poetry and express their preference of some poets over others.<sup>58</sup> Evidence of poetic criticism can be seen in the fact that when Al-Nābighah Al-Zibyanī entered Yathrib and recited his poetic melodies, he was praised. Tarafah was also said to have reproved Al-Mutalmis for his description of camels. Another poet, Al-Muhalhal Bin Rabī'ah, was also rebuked by the masses for his exaggeration.

At one instance the Arabs rebuked Al-Nābighah Al-Zibāynī and Bashār Bin Abī Khāzin for certain weaknesses in their poetry, viz., differences in rhyme. No one was able to speak to Al-Nābighah frankly about this fault, until he entered Yathrib once. The relevant verse was recited to him and he immediately realised the deficiency. As for Bashār Bin Abī Khāzin, his brother Sawādah pointed his error to him. In the Ḥijāz province the Quraysh were generally regarded as the most learned.

Ḥammād Al-Rāwiyah reports that the Arabs used to present their poetry to the Quraysh: Whatever they rejected was regarded as inferior poetry.<sup>59</sup>

These incidents are proof of the existence of literary criticism during the pre-Islamic period. In view of all this evidence, it seems proper to conclude that poetry during the Jāhillyah almost became a science: people studied poetry and took lessons in it. The poetry of Zuhayr Bin Abī Salmā was said to have improved dramatically after his contact with Bashshāmah Bin Al-Qādir.

Credit is due to the pre-Islamic Arabs for producing poetry that was Arabic in composition: Arabic in so far as its feet, methods, aims and spirit were concerned. No matter what spiritual trends confronted the Arabs, due to the Christians and other civilisations in the sixth century, Arabic poetry remained loyal to its pure original character and continued on its path to literary glory.

However, this perfection in poetry was reached after much experimentation and correction. Pre-Islamic poetry was exposed to many forces of refinement until it reached the state of perfection which we find at the end of the sixth century. The animating singsong which remained the nucleus of poetry, was explained; the "qaṣīdah" was strengthened. Ṭarafah, for example, did not master the principles of Arabic poetry all at once, his poetry reached perfection only after much experimentation, correction and refinement.

If ever there was a single source of information that reflected the social, cultural, political and religious life of the pre-Islamic Arabs, it was undoubtedly poetry. Since the Jāhilī poets were reputed

to have contact with divine powers, they were respected almost as if they were prophets. Hence they believed their poetry to be pure and sacred. Pre-Islamic poetry with its highly effective word concision, realistic description and independent style, together with its religious tag, seemed to create a picture of poetry par excellence; to the extent that throughout the development of Arabic literary culture it was regarded as the standard to judge all other poetry. But this poetry had grave defects.

Jāhili poetry was based on an ideology which had fundamental weaknesses. The Arabs were confused about their concept of God: the majority of them resorted to idol worship. The social life of the Arabs compared with the worst in other parts of the Middle East and Europe. Excessive drinking and adultery were regarded as virtues. For the Arab, engaging in battles was a common way of life. The grave deficiencies were mirrored in their poems, reducing it to a poetry that was to a large extent sensual, immoral and atheistic. For example, one of the greatest Jahili poets, Imru' l Qais, openly admitted being a very successful adulterer.<sup>60</sup> Whatever the pre-Islamic poets achieved by way of structure and style, was lost in content. Arabic poetry was now in need of a revolution, a revolution that would upgrade its content to match it with a form that was supreme. But this revolution in poetry could never be achieved without a revolution that encompassed all aspects of Arab life. This began at the dawn of the seventh century.

# REFERENCES

1. Encyclopaedia of Islam, 1960 ed., Vol. 1, p. 583.
2. Cf. R. Jacobi: Studien zur Poetik der altarabischen Qaside, (Wiesbaden, 1971), Chapter III, especially the section Der rhetorische Stil.
3. A. Hamori: On the art of medieval Arabic literature, p. 3.
4. Ta'rīkh Ibn Khaldūn, Vol. 1, p. 101.
5. A.H. Ziyārat: Tarīkh Adab al-'Arabī, p. 79.
6. T.A Ibrāhīm: Ta'rīkh Al-Naqd Al-Adabī 'inda Al-'Arab, p. 15.
7. M.T. Darwīsh: Al-Naqd Al-Adabī, p. 52; Imtā' wa Al-Mu'ānasah, Vol. 1, pp. 81-82.
8. Muqaddimah, Vol. 1, p. 252.
9. A.M. Zubaldī: "The impact of the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth on medieval Arabic literature", in A.F.L. Beston (gen. ed.): Arabic literature to the end of the Umayyad Period, p. 322.
10. Ibn Qutaibah: 'Uyūn Al-Akhbār, Vol. II, p. 185.
11. A. Hamori: On the art of Medieval Arabic literature, p. 5.
12. The summary of all their critics is to be found in Muḏhir, Vol. II, pp. 251-253.
13. Abu'l Faraj Al-Iṣfahānī (d. 967), Kitāb Al Aghānī (Cairo), Vol. II, p. 172.
14. T. Ḥussain: Fī Al-Adab Al-Jāhilī, p. 245.
15. M.J. Kister: "The Seven Odes", BSOA. XLIV (1969), pp. 27-36.
16. In the Prolegomena to his addition of the Mu'allaqah of Imru' al Qais (Born 1823).

17. T. Ḥusayn: Fi'l Adab Al-Jāhili, p. 246.
18. Ibid., p. 250.
19. T.A. Ibrāhīm: Ta'rīkh Al-Naqd Al-Adabi 'inda Al-'Arab, p. 16.
20. A.E. Ṭayib: "Pre-Islamic poetry", in A.F.L. Beeston (gen. ed): Arabic literature to the end of the Umayyad period, p. 75.
21. Al-Mufaḍḍal Al-Ḍabbī (d.c. 786), Al-Mufaḍḍaliyāt, (Cairo, 1906), Vol. 1, p. 13.
22. A.H. Ziyārat: Tarikh Adabe 'Arabī, p. 60.
23. Abu'l Faraj Al-Iṣfahānī (d. 967), Kitāb Al-Aghānī, (Cairo), New York. Vol. XI, p. 172.
24. See Ibn Khaldūn: Ta'rīkh 'Ibn Khaldūn, Vol. 1, pp. 499-505.
25. H.A.R. Gibb: Arabic Literature, p. 19.
26. Ibid, p. 26.
27. Ibn 'Abd Rabbihi: Al-'Iqd Al-Farīd, Vol. II, p. 92.
28. Ibn Khaldūn: Al-Muqaddimah, Vol. III, p. 374.
29. Al-Jumāhī: Ṭabaqāt, p. 22.
30. Al-Suyūṭī: Muḏḥir, Vol. II, p. 291 ff.; Ibn Rashīq: 'Umdah, Vol. I, p. 30.
31. Muḏḥir, Vol. II, p. 236.
32. A. Hamorī: On the art of Medieval Arabic literature, p. 6.
33. V. Cantarino: Arabic poetics in the Golden Age, p. 22.
34. Al-Jumāhī, Ṭabaqāt, pp. 23-4; Ibn Rashīq, 'Umdah, Vol. 1, pp. 189-112.
35. Kitāb Al-Shīr wa Al-Shu'arā, Vol. I, p. 20.
36. 'Umdah, Vol. I, p. 206.
37. A.S. Kinany: The development of 'gazal' in Arabic literature, pp. 79-82.

38. W.S. Blunt: The seven golden odes of pagan Arabia, p. 11.
39. Encyclopaedia of Islam, 1960 ed. Vol. 1, p. 584.
40. A.H. Ziyārat: Ta'rīkh Adab al-'Arabī, p. 77.
41. Ibn Qutaibah: Shi'r, p. 20 - 2.
42. The term literally means "suspended". One story asserts that they were the winning poems at poetic tournaments held at the fair of 'Ukāz, transcribed in gold and hung up in the Ka'bah at Mecca.
43. Cf. Ibn Rashīq, 'Umdah, Vol. I, p. 96.
44. A.H. Ziyārat: Ta'rīkh Adab al-'Arabī, p. 80.
45. H.A.R. Gibb: Arabic Literature, p. 23.
46. Mukhtār, Vol. 1, pp. 114-21.
47. Dīwān, p. 67.
48. A.J. Arberry: Arabic Poetry, p. 34.
49. H.A.R. Gibb: Arabic Literature, p. 24.
50. A.J. Arberry: Arabic Poetry, p. 34.
51. See I. Goldziher: "Abhandlungen zur arab" in Philologie, Vol. 1, 1896, pp. 1-121.
52. Noted by Al-Jāhīz, Hayawān, Vol. 1, p. 359.
53. See 'Iyār al-Shi'r, p. 45.
54. A.J. Arberry: Arabic Poetry, p. 38.
55. Encyclopaedia of Islam, 1960 ed., Vol. 1, p. 584.
56. Cf. Ibn Rashīq, 'Umdah, p. 80.
57. Ibn Khaldūn: Ta'rīkh Ibn Khaldūn, Vol. 1, p. 509.
58. M.T. Darwish: al-Naqd al-Adabī, p. 68.
59. T.A. Ibrāhīm: Ta'rīkh al-Naqd al-Adabī 'inda al-'Arab, p. 21.
60. Dīwān, p. 67.





## CHAPTER THREE

### CENSORSHIP OF POETICS BY THE QUR'ĀN

The topic "the Qur'ān and poetry" has occupied the minds of scholars from the first century A.H. to the present day. The chapter Al-Shu'arā (XXVI) was the locus classicus for this study. However, scholars have always remained divided over the implications of the label Islamic poetry. Some had even arrived at the conclusion that poetry had no place in Islam. This apparent confusion was due mainly to a poor understanding of the meaning of verses 221-227 of chapter XXVI - which provide the most detailed Qur'ānic account of poets and poetry - and the circumstances surrounding their revelation. In this chapter, an attempt will be made to illustrate the climate in which the various Qur'ānic verses relating to poetry were revealed, and explain some of the genre of poetry that may be classed "Islamic".

In pre-Islamic Arabia, poetry was a status symbol. It was the academy that safeguarded their culture and a living symbol of beauty among them. With the advent of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) poetry became a medium for the Meccans to direct their attack on the Qur'ān and Islam in general.<sup>1</sup> The last seven verses of "sūrah Al-Shu'arā" were revealed as a defence of the Prophet and Islam. This Meccan criticism of the Qur'ān being poetry, received the attention of scholars throughout the centuries. Al-Bāqillānī (d. 1015), in the chapter "On the negation of

poetry in the Qur'ān" in his *Kitab I'jāz Al-Qur'ān* (On the inimitability of the Qur'ān) discussed at length all the formal aspects in the traditional definition of poetry to show that they were not really present in the Qur'ānic text; and over a century later Al-Zamaksharī (d. 1143) in his exegesis of the texts pointed out:

Poetry is a rhymed and metrically rhythmic speech expressing a meaning; and what comparison can be drawn between metre, rhyme and meanings which the poets use, with the ones found in the Qur'an, in matters of composition and style?<sup>2</sup>

The inimitability and miraculous uniqueness of the Qur'ān, applied since early times to its literary composition and linguistic expression, exerted a great influence on Arabic literature. Literary perfection and literary beauty are found in the Qur'ānic text, which possesses these qualities to an inimitable degree without being poetic. The importance of the literary uniqueness of the Qur'ān lies in the fact that without being "poetry" or "poetic", it surpasses in style even the most accomplished stylists. Towards the end of the ninth century Al-Mubarrad used this argument in his *Kitāb Al-Badī'*, and it was repeated as valid in the fifteenth century by Al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505) in Al-Marrakūshī's quotation:

Each of the kinds of discourse has its own stylistic structure. The Qur'ān unites the beauties of all of them in a style other than theirs.<sup>3</sup>

In the early centuries the protagonists and opponents of poetry used the Qur'ān at great lengths to defend their standpoints. The words of the Qur'ān were often described as "loose" speech.<sup>4</sup> Some of the writers who defamed poetry used as an argument the fact that the Qur'ān is in "loose" speech, independent of the speech of poets. There exists - in the eyes of these writers - a polarisation between Islam and poetry. In order to lend substance to their argument, they also quote the fact that the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) was not a poet: "We have not taught him poetry; he does not desire it." (Al-Qur'ān XXXVI, 69). These writers believe that their argument has hit the mark, but in this there is more against their argument than in favour of it. God sent his Apostle as an illiterate - and not a poet - to people who were aware of this fact, at a time when elegant speech was already developed and eloquence widespread, precisely as a miracle to prove His prophecy, as an argument to mankind, and as something inimitable for those with a rebellious spirit. He offered it as unique "loose" discourse so that it would be the clearest proof of its pre-eminence over poetry, the composer of which usually has a variety of styles to choose from. And although men; poets or not, attempted to produce something similar to it; they failed. As God had already asserted: "Say, even if men and jinn tried together to produce a Qur'ān similar to this, they will not be able to do so, even if they helped each other" (Al-Qur'ān XXVII, 88). Thus, in the same way as the Qur'ān is inimitable for orators without being oratory, and for epistle-writers though it is not the art of letter writing; still its inimitability for poets constitutes its main proof.

The polytheists at the time of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) frequently alleged that he was a poet, and that the Qur'ān was a type of poetry, and that its uniqueness was due to the fact that it was poetic.<sup>5</sup> The differences between the nature of the Qur'ānic text and poetry cannot be over-emphasised; in word and meaning, in balance and rhyme, there exists a vast polarisation between the Qur'ān and poetry. Poetic compositions and styles are often pregnant with fantasies, lies and false sayings. In the eyes of many literary critics, the more deceitful poetry was generally more pleasant to the audience.<sup>6</sup> Many of the Meccan "mushrikīn" (polytheists) alleged that the Qur'ān was simply a poetic production of Moḥammad (p.b.u.h.). But how could the Qur'ān be poetry when the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) was not a poet? Allah did not teach him poetry, nor did he desire to become a poet. It did not behove his great honour and rank to be a poet: as a panegyrist or satirist, or to become simply engrossed in their frivolous discourses. Allah destined the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) not to be restricted by the shackles of poetry. The Qur'ān is above poetry. It is basically a book containing fundamental beliefs, laws, guidance, and promises for those who submit themselves to Islam.

There existed a very small degree of similarity in form between some passages of the Qur'ān and Hebrew.<sup>7</sup> Imam Rāghib, commenting on those Qur'ānic verses which discuss the Meccan accusation of the Prophet being a poet, says that the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) was accused of composing poetry (rhymed and metrical composition) to the extent that they began interpreting all those Qur'ānic verses which appeared metrical, as poetry. For instance:

(Al - Qur'ān XXXIV. 14).

That was enough to make a prejudicial, even hostile, audience level the charge of poetry with some semblance of credibility. That was all that a prejudiced, even hostile, audience such as the Meccans wanted or needed in order to level the false charge that the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) was a poet. Thus, set against this Meccan background of a hostile and slanderous audience at Mecca, the charge of the Qur'ān being poetry and the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) a poet, false as it is, becomes intelligible.

The Meccan charge of the Qur'ān being poetry, had many extra-literal implications. The Arab did not simply label the Qur'ān "poetic" because they considered it to be rhymed and metrical composition. It is plainly evident that the style of the Qur'ān is different from that of poetry. This reality can also be understood by non-Arabs. In their frustration of not being able to halt the mission of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), they accused him of being a liar, because in the Arabic language poetry often takes the connotation of lying, to the extent that false evidence is used as proof.<sup>8</sup>

If ever there was a weapon that could be used to indoctrinate the pre-Islamic Arabs, it was poetry. Excellence in metre, melody, tone and composition marked the pinnacle of Arabic rhetoric. But the revelation of the Qur'ān sounded as a strange discourse to the "mushrikīn". Their perceptive faculties were shaken to the extent that even Abū Sufyān bin Ḥarb, Abū Jahl bin Hishām and Al-Akhnas bin Sharīq used to come out at night and listen to the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.)

reciting the Qur'ān in his prayer. They used to stand individually, at a distance, unaware of the presence of each other. This practice continued for a number of nights.<sup>9</sup> The divine rhetoric of the Qur'ān had the effect of softening the heart of one of its most ardent enemies, 'Umar bin Al-Khaṭṭāb, who then found it impossible to avoid becoming a Muslim.<sup>10</sup> The "mushrikīn" of Mecca failed in their attempts to produce a verse to match a Qur'ānic one. That they were taken aback by the literary merits of the Qur'ān, is an accepted fact. They were perplexed, and because they did not have the courage (on account of their pride) to acknowledge the excellence of the Qur'ān, they summed the Qur'ān as the work of a "mad poet".<sup>11</sup> In reality, they could not censure the Qur'ānic text. In one instance Walīd bin Al-Mughīrah addressed them saying:

We have mastered poetry, all facets of it: its metre, tone and composition. The Qur'ān is definitely not poetry! Indeed it is a very graceful composition: its foundation is firm and its branches are full of fruit. Whatever you are saying concerning it, let it be known that is all baseless.<sup>12</sup>

In their social role as moral leaders and spokesmen of their tribes, the pre-Islamic poets were often the vanguard in the opposition of pagan Arabs tribes against the new way of life represented by the Prophet's preaching. It is difficult to discern a real religious life among the Arabs who were the Prophet's contemporaries. Their religious cults, which had at first represented the manifestation of religion among them, for the most part no longer had such a meaning.<sup>13</sup> Not

only had pilgrimages and old shrines long ago lost their original pious significance, but in reality they had become occasions for marts and fairs in which pleasure and amusement were an important aspect.

The Meccan accusations and criticism of the Prophet and the Qur'ān were not to remain unanswered. In the last seven verses of Surah Al-Shu'arā (the Chapter of the poets XXXVI.221 - 227) the Qur'ān defends its divine purity and the mission of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.). Verse 221: "Shall I inform you unto whom the shayatin descend?" is a reply to the Meccan accusation : "The Qur'ān is simply a revelation of the shayāṭīn". The objective of the reply is to emphasize the fact that the "shayāṭīn" instil evil and inspire the sinful liars into acts of vanity.<sup>14</sup>

Says the Holy Qur'ān: "shayāṭīn of men and jinn inspire each other with vain talk" (Al-Qur'ān VI. 112). The "shayāṭīn" do not have any contact with the prophets and the pious. Hence they endeavour to make contact with the wicked, and these in turn become their agents.<sup>15</sup>

The words "hal unabbi-ukum" (Shall I inform you?) is directly addressed to the population of Makkah. The "mushrikīn" of Makkah constantly accused the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) for being the recipient of material supplied by the "shayāṭīn". Verses 221-223 of Al-Shu'arā intend to give the other side of the story. The "mushrikīn" poets, and not the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), were the recipients of the concocted material of the "shayāṭīn".

The question posed in verse 221 is answered in verse 222. "They (i.e. the "shayāṭīn") descend on every lying, wicked person". In this verse

special mention is made of the pre-Islamic poet who entertained the "shyāṭīn" and then used this information to "guide" the masses. The role of the poet in pre-Islamic Arabia was to a large extent similar to that of a prophet. But did the pre-Islamic Arabs have a religion? Did they believe in a single god?

Many of the pre-Islamic Arabs acknowledged the existence of Allah. However, their concept of Allah was quite different from the traditional Islamic one. They admitted the existence of a "high" god, Allah, who appears to have been recognised as a supreme creator god, but who had retired to a lesser position. There were also numerous greater gods - those whose position lay somewhat between Allah and the hordes of the jinn - and these possessed permanent shrines cared for by a resident attendant, the "Sādin", while their formal worship was conducted before the visible symbol of their presence, the graven idol.<sup>16</sup> Most visitors to the shrines came in order to make thank-offerings or to consult the divinity, either by means of the divining arrows ("azlām") kept at the shrine, or through the "Kāhin", male or female, who spoke in the voice and by the authority of an inspiring demon. Below "Kāhin" and "Sādin" came inferior grades of fortune tellers, sorcerers and diviners of various sorts.

In the eyes of the pre-Islamic Arabs the rest of the world was dominated or overrun by the jinn, said to be demons who could be malevolent or malignant, who filled the earth both waste and inhabited, though they could approach the celestial domain of the Higher god<sup>17</sup>,



and who frequently appeared in terrifying animal forms, simple or composite, though they might prefer to retain normal invisibility.

Were the pre-Islamic poets simply the victims of the malicious plots of the jinn and "shayāṭīn"? Certainly not. The Qur'ān throws light on this topic by emphasising that it were the poets on their own initiative who were responsible for their involvement in the vicious circles of the "shayāṭīn". "They lend their ears, and most of them are liars" (Al-Qur'ān XXVI. 223). The poet was plainly guilty of receiving the "shayāṭīn" and listening to their information gained from eavesdropping.<sup>18</sup> The verb "yulqūna" pertains to the unbelievers. They (the unbelievers) listen to the "shayāṭīn", obtaining from them information pregnant with lies and trivialities. The utterances of the poets were generally lies, and their prophecies, in most cases, proved untrue.<sup>19</sup> The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) in contrast, was an embodiment of truth. The title "Al-Ṣādiq" (the truthful one), was given to him by the entire Meccan community. It is totally absurd that a person of such calibre be a direct partner with the Shayāṭīn.

- ✓ The Qur'ān goes to great lengths to emphasise the purity of its text
- ✓ and the mission of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.). Says the Holy Qur'ān:

It is not the word of a poet. Little it is you believe.  
Nor is it the word of a soothsayer. Little admonition it is you receive. (This is) a message sent down from the Lord of the worlds.

(AL-Qur'ān LXIX 41-43)

The express intention of the above-mentioned verses is to nullify the allegations of the "mushrikūn" that the Qur'ān is the fraudulent work of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) who was supposed to be a "Kāhīn". The allegations of the pre-Islamic poets against the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) were, in reality, a projection of their own occupations. Soothsaying and dealing in magic, for example, were an integral part of the life-style of many pre-Islamic poets.

In pre-Islamic Arabia the "Kuhhān" (plural of Kāhīn) constituted the elite of the community. Cases brought before a judge-arbiter or "Kāhīn" would be settled according to the appropriate Sunnah.<sup>20</sup> Many judges were also "Kuhhān", and there is a verse alluding to a judgement by Al-Kāhīn Al-Ṭāghūt, but with "Kuhhān" magic always seems to be involved in arriving at a judgement. The "Kuhhān" proclaimed their decisions in rhymed prose saǰ' of lofty style.

There are eight Qur'ānic allusions to a term parallel to "Kāhīn", the "ṭāghūt". The "Mu'minūn" are prohibited from seeking judgement from the "ṭāghūt", but must refer their disputes to Allah and his Apostle (p.b.u.h.).<sup>21</sup> Verse 51 of Chapter 4 alludes to "those who brought a portion of the Book, believing (trusting) in the "jibt" and the "ṭāghūt". Perhaps the ancient "ḥukm al-ṭāghūt" means a law based upon a whole body of precedents; often the "ṭāghūt" judge is called a "shayṭān" or magician because of his association with a familiar spirit. How the "ṭāghūt" was associated with the ancient Arabian cults is revealed in the description of them as "interpreters of the idols,

speaking with people with their tongues". Juhaynah is said to have had a "ṭāghūt" (elsewhere a "Kāhin"), and "there was one in every tribe, they being "Kuhhān" upon whom the "shayāṭīn" were caused to descend (tanazzalu)". There was a "Kāhin" at Sa'dah of the Yemen and northerners seem to have repaired to Yemeni "Kuhhān".<sup>22</sup>

Almost all the "Kuhhān" were poets also. Above all, they provided spiritual guidance - albeit a concocted one - to their communities. Viewed in this light, the unrestricted Qur'ānic condemnation of poets becomes more intelligible. The pre-Islamic Arabs, led by their "Kuhhān", claimed that their female divinities Al-Lāt, Al-Manāt and Al-'Uzzā were the "daughters of Allah".<sup>23</sup> They turned angels into female beings and worshipped them in the same way. Moreover, they established a kinship between God and the jinn, and made the latter into partners of God.<sup>24</sup> Instead of seeing the error of their ways, they felt obliged to remain loyal to the polytheism of their fathers.

The notion of a resurrection of the dead, they rejected scornfully. They declared the message that Moḥammad (p.b.u.h.) preached to be false; they called him a liar, a poet or a soothsayer, but more often "sha'irun majnūn" (a poet possessed).

From the preceding lines it is obvious that the poets were the founders of an ideology that was based on superstition and evil. Hence their position as leaders of the community, could not be justified. Verse 224 of Al-Shu'arā focusses on this issue: "And the poets, only the

perverse follow them" (Al-Qur'ān XXXVI. 224). The commentators of the Qur'ān all agree that this verse refers to those poets who persisted in uttering poetry that fulfilled Jāhilī objectives, and the "mushrikūn" that inflicted harm on the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) and satirised him. These Meccan poets were united in their attempts at satirising the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and his family in the Ḥaram.<sup>25</sup> They (the Meccans) used to listen to the Jāhilī poetry and then made serious attempts at implementing the poetical directives in their daily lives, exceeding all bounds of moderation in the process.<sup>26</sup> These poets used to praise a thing after criticising it, hold a thing in esteem after despising it, in short, their poetry did not seek truth and reality.

The Qur'ān reminds us of the fact that the pre-Islamic poets were constantly engaged in changing the face of reality. This is done at such great frequency that the poet loses almost all credibility.

Maulānā Shabbīr 'Uthmānī, commenting on this aspect, writes: After deciding on a topic the (pre-Islamic) poet ascribes to it characteristics which are not in it. He praises a person to such an extent so as to make him superhuman. He makes derogatory remarks about a certain person, accusing him of committing the worst crimes. These are all frequent habits of his. In short, they originate from the wilderness of lying, exaggeration and fancy. It is for this reason that poetry is often described as: "The best poetry is that which lies most."<sup>27</sup>

Although the exegetes ("mufasssirrūn") and the translators are divided on the interpretation of some of the terms in verses 224-227 (of Al-Shu'arā), there is consensus as to the tenor of the Qur'ānic discourse on the poets, on the ground on which the poets are denounced. The term "Al-Ghāwūna" in verse 224 is interpreted to denote persons and to connote primarily their ethical attributes: they are "beguiled"<sup>28</sup>, "perverse"<sup>29</sup>, "deviators". The single most important term which dominates the whole discourse is "al-ghāwūna".

In his commentary on the Qur'ān, Ṭabarī gives a variety of denotations for the term "al-ghāwūna". One of these denotations is "shayāṭīn" or jinn.<sup>30</sup> It may be argued that this denotation offers the fairest chance for an adequate interpretation of these verses.

- a) The association of the poets with "shayāṭīn" expresses a more basic denunciation than their association with erring persons.
- b) It is perfectly in agreement with the Qur'ānic conception of "shayāṭīn" and their relation to human beings. In Qur'ānic terminology the "shayāṭīn" are rebellious jinn who went astray and who lead men astray; the notion of going astray and leading astray is expressed in the Qur'ān through the verb "ghawā" or one of its derivatives. "Al-ghāwūna" is one of them.<sup>31</sup>
- c) The association of "shayāṭīn" with poets as the source of their poetic inspiration is established as an Arabic, and an Islamic

conception. This is not unknown to the Qur'ān: verse 36, surah Al-Ṣaffāt (Chapter XXXVII), refers to the Meccan description of Moḥammad (p.b.u.h.) as a "sha'irun majnūn", "a poet possessed by a jinn".

- d) More important than all the preceding arguments is the comprehension of the main theme of sūrah Al-Shu'arā; namely the truth of Moḥammad's (p.b.u.h.) prophethood. The Meccans had accused the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) elsewhere in the Qur'ān that he was, among other things, a poet (and in one verse that he was possessed by a demon (Qur'ān XXXVII. 36), and that the Qur'ān, too, was inspired by the same agent. These charges were answered by the affirmation that the Qur'ān was from God, was not the work of human beings, and was inimitable. To prove its divine origin and uniqueness it became necessary to distinguish it from the discourse with which it had been confused by the Meccans, namely, poetry. The most effective way of demonstrating this contrast between the two was by contrasting their respective source. God, the source of the Qur'ān; and the shayāṭīn; the source of poetry. This the sūrah does in emphatic terms.

The employment of the term "al-ghāwūna" to describe the "shayāṭīn" is striking. The Qur'ān not only denounces certain poets by associating them with the "shayāṭīn", but it also denounces the "shayāṭīn", by applying to this depreciatory term which dissociates them from God.

The Qur'ān continues with its revelation of the poets by posing the following question: "Do you not see how they wander aimlessly in every valley? (Qur'ān XXXI. 225). The term "wādin" is a key word employed in this verse and it admits of one of two explanations:

- 1) It may have been used in the literal sense of "wādin".<sup>32</sup> The valleys are one of the abodes of the jinn and the "shayāṭīn" in the consciousness of the Arabs, both in pre-Islamic and Islamic times. To these valleys then, the poets resort for their poetic inspiration, and in these haunts they wander distraught. Sometimes those (terrifying) shayātīn were said to have been propitiated by Arabs on journeys, according to Ibn Ishāq, with the following words:

I seek refuge in the lord of this valley of the  
jinn, tonight, from the evil that is therein.<sup>33</sup>

- 2) The term "wādin" may have been used metaphorically.<sup>34</sup> It would stand in a moral sense for the path of straying, in contrast to the straight path of truth and righteousness. Such a metaphorical use of "wādin" can be easily accounted for. As a depressed, crooked and winding path where the traveller can lose his bearings, the valley would be an appropriate metaphor for the abode of those straying morally. The Qur'ān makes use of a number of words, related as topographical features, to express the concept of righteousness and truth, namely, "ṣirāṭ", "sabīl", "ṭarīqah", "minhāj".<sup>35</sup> These are mainly used to indicate the path of righteousness. "Wādin" would be preferred for the expression of

the path of 'straying, "ghay", and in contrast with the path of righteousness expressed so many times through a number of words related to "wādīn" topographically. Many of the commentators interpret this verse (Verse 226) both literally and metaphorically, though the latter is given preference. Commenting on this verse, Ibn 'Abbās says that this verse refers to poets who err "in every facet of speech".<sup>36</sup> Ḥasan Al-Baṣrī, commenting on this theme, says:

By Allah, we have seen them deeply engrossed in their valleys, at times abusing someone, and then praising him.<sup>37</sup>

Sayyid Quṭb in his *Fī ṣilāl Al-Qur'ān* ("In the shade of the Qur'ān") describes the early Meccan poets as "passive individuals frequenting valleys. They are simply dominated by the 'shayāṭīn".<sup>38</sup> Perhaps the most serious criticism of poets was made by Qatādah:

A poet is one who praises a people with falsehood and rebukes a people with falsehood.<sup>39</sup>

Ālūsī is another of the commentators that prefers the metaphorical interpretation to verse 225. He emphasises that it is only the dilettantes that follows the poets. Says Ālūsī:



Do you not see the poets in all the valleys of idle talk; in every meeting of suspicion and fantasy; and in every road of deception and error. They wander aimlessly about. On the contrary they are confused in the waste lands of error and foolishness, and they get lost in the desert of vain glory and idolence. Their habit is (simply) slandering others by means of their satires.<sup>40</sup>

Do you not see them wander aimlessly in every valley of deception and falsehood? This seems to be a common comment in most commentaries. Here the mission of the Prophet is contrasted against that of the poets. The path of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) is "al-ṣirāṭ al-Mustaqīm" (the straight path), without any deviations, and leading straight to the ultimate reality, God. The poets on the other hand, frequent the paths in valleys, paths that are winding and crooked. This crookedness is indicative of the poets' aimlessness.<sup>41</sup> They have missed the mark of reality (Allah), and hence are wandering aimlessly in paths, "guided" by the "shayāṭīn".

The Qur'ān goes further in its denunciation of the poets by stating that: "And they say that which they do not (Al-Qur'ān XXVI. 226). Unlike verses 224 and 225 the lexical units of this verse are crystal clear and do not admit of such alternative significations as noted in the case of "al-ghāwūna" and "yattabi'uhum". This verse is usually translated literally and correctly: "And they say that which they do not do", a rendition that faithfully reproduces the message of the original. The majority of exegetes take the verse simply to mean that the poets are liars. Ibn 'Abbās reports that this verse was directed at the "mushrik" poets: 'Abd Allāh bin Al-Zibā'ra, Hubayrah bin Wahn Al-Makhzūmī, Musāfī bin 'Abd Manāf, Abū 'Izzah Al-Jumāḥī and Umayyah bin

Abī Al-Ṣalt. These poets used to say: "Our sayings are similar to those of Moḥammad (p.b.u.h.)".<sup>42</sup> They were constantly engaged in satirising the Prophet (p.b.u.h.). In another report by Ibn 'Abbās, the concept of poets as liars is endorsed: "In most of their sayings they lie".<sup>43</sup> The pre-Islamic poets often boasted of sayings and deeds, which in reality, did not originate from them. Furthermore, they exaggerated on these so-called achievements. It is for this reason that scholars are divided on the contents of poetry: Should they endorse what the poets say, especially after accepting that the poets often say things they do not do?

The vast majority of exegetes interpret verse 226 as one in which the poets are simply guilty of lying. However, few exegetes have taken on the task of demonstrating exactly in what sense the poets are liars, and how this denunciation is applicable to them. This interpretation has been inspired by some basic questions that have to be raised before a satisfactory interpretation can be given:

- 1) It is significant that the Qur'ān does not use any of the many words that clearly signify lying in Arabic. Instead it employs an expression that is composed of two verbs, neither of which is related to "lying" or mendacity, "yaqūlūna" and "yaf'alūna". These two verbs together make up a phrase which describes a situation more complex than the simple one of telling lies normally expressed by such terms as "kāzib", "ifk", or the negative of "ṣidq".

- 2) The denunciation of the poets simply as liars, coming in an Arabic text about Arabic poets, is surprising. It does not correspond with the image of the poets of Arabia in pre-Islam and at the time of the rise of Islam. The poets were a respected group, the spokesmen of their tribes, and quite often were their "sayyyids".<sup>44</sup> The pre-Islamic Arab ideal of the perfect man ("al-kāmil") included being a poet as one of its constituents. Did the Qur'ān then apply any restraint in its denunciation of poets?

A close examination of the verse in the light of the preceding observations reveals the three following facts which must be taken into consideration for arriving at a fair exegesis of the verse:

- 1) The "mendacity" of the poets involves, or primarily involves, not others, but the poets themselves.
- 2) The Qur'ān sees grave defects in the pre-Islamic poets and their compositions and censures these poets without any restraint.
- 3) The employment of two verbs in the denunciation clearly indicates that besides lying about others the poets also fail to fulfil by their deeds ("yaf' alūna") the promise they had made in words ("yaqūlūna"). Thus the Qur'ān besides stating that they lie about others, also notes their inability to fulfil what they had promised to do - to "deliver the goods".

This then is the situation that this verse describes, significantly in two phrases, namely: the blatant lying on the part of the poets; and/or the inability of the poets or their failure. What, then in real terms, does this failure consist in?

It may be argued that the two verses in Sūrah Al-Ṣaff, LXI, 2-3, may lend meaning to the phrases "they say that which they do not do". This assists us in answering the question that has just been asked, namely, what was it that the poets promised or said they would do but were unable to. It may also be argued that this verse, 226, refers to the well-known "taḥaddī/i'jāz" problem, the challenge that the Qur'ān flung to its opponents to produce something like it, and their failure to do so. In support of this contention the following arguments may be cited:

- 1) The Qur'ānic passages on "taḥaddī/i'jāz" (five Meccan and one Medinese) do reflect this situation, namely, the challenge of the Qur'ān to the opponents to produce something like the Qur'ān and their inability to do so.<sup>45</sup>
- 2) A Qur'ānic verse (226) on the poets describing a situation that involves their inability to perform or fulfil a promise can be greatly understood with reference to the "taḥaddī/i'jāz" problem, and could suggest that the poets were implied at least in part in the "taḥaddī/ i'jāz" verses quoted above.<sup>46</sup> They were indeed the natural group to take up the challenge that involved a

literary document - the Qur'ānic revelations. No other group could with more appropriateness have been challenged or would have responded with more readiness.

- 3) The interpretation of verse 226 is consonant with that of verse 224 in which "al-ghāwūna" was interpreted as denoting "shayāṭīn" who go astray and lead men astray. The interpretation of these two verses may now be seen to be corroborative.<sup>47</sup> The role of the "shayāṭīn" in the Qur'ān as mischievous creatures is well known. They are jinn who rebelled against God and whose function was to lead men astray. Among instances of this may now be counted their helping the poets to take up the challenge of producing something like the Qur'ān.

Perhaps the argumentation in the preceding paragraphs may now be summed up and the implications of the conclusions may be pointed out:

- 1) The alleged moral failure of the poets has been examined and shown to be related to one of the central doctrines of the Qur'ān, namely, its inimitability, its "i'jāz". The poets took up the challenge, the "taḥaddī" flung by the Qur'ān, but they failed to produce anything like it. The Qur'ān remains inimitable, and the poets are thus denounced for their failure as much as for their impiety in taking up the challenge with all that, that implies.

- 2) It is evident that verse 226 allows for more than one interpretation. The majority of Islamic scholars have always considered poetry as a lie and some poets as liars.<sup>48</sup> In doing so, they were influenced by the traditional exegesis of this famous verse 226. Furthermore, the image of the poets was affected by this traditional exegesis, and so was the attitude of the authorities towards poets who boasted in their poetry of their violation of certain moral standards and who invoked the traditional exegesis of this verse in order to avoid punishment.<sup>49</sup> It is not the objective of this work to put aside the traditional interpretation of verse 226 as one which pertains to lying. It needs to be noted, however, that verse 226 involved a very serious charge also - the *ijāz* of the Qur'ān - a contest that involved the very essence of Islam, the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and the Holy Book.
- 3) This study of verse 226 may throw much light on the nature and basis of the struggle recorded in the Qur'ān between Islam and poetry. The struggle was not so much against poetry "per se" as against certain poets - the poets of Mecca or Ḥijāz whose names are known and certain fragments of whose poetry have survived.<sup>50</sup> This study may also throw light on the poets' rivalry with the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), their rejection of the Qur'ān as the Word of God, and their impiety in taking up the challenge to produce something like it.

Finally the study of verse 226 (in this work) may contribute towards providing answers to the vexed question that has for so long occupied Qur'ānic scholars, namely, what does the i'jāz consist in. Many answers to this question have been given, but verse 226 correctly interpreted gives two significant explanations: not only were the Meccan poets plainly guilty of lying; but they were also contemporaries who took part in the battle of the Qur'ān and its miraculous nature. Verse 226, which, as has been argued, involves i'jāz, was explicitly addressed to the poets. But these were literary artists and their acceptance of the challenge could only imply that they understood the inimitability of the Qur'ān in literary terms - that the "taḥaddī" expressed or implied the view that the Qur'an was a unique and miraculous literary phenomenon which even the most accomplished literary artists of Arabia, the poets, could not imitate and actually would fail if they dared to do so.

The unrestrained censure of poets by the Qur'ān - highlighted in verses 224-227 of Al-Shu'arā, has prompted many scholars to ask, "Isn't the Qur'ānic criticism of the poets suggestive of Islam's fight against poetry and the arts?" Are the poets simply the followers of an uncultivated production and a detested profession? Much of the confusion among Muslims and non-Muslims - concerning the Qur'ānic censureship of poetry may be attributed to a poor understanding of a central issue in Islamic poetics, namely, the issue of form and content. Not all poetry is blameworthy, and that poetry which is objectionable has been labelled objectionable not because of the fact



that it is poetry. Islam views poetry simply as a mode of expression. The good and the "pus" in it is attributable to its meaning. So long as the meaning remains beautiful the poetic composition will radiate beauty. It is common knowledge that poetry has always been a fundamental pillar in the history of Islamic literary culture. The following verse by the renowned Al-Buṣṭī is a classical example of poetry which meets with the full approval of Islam. In praise of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) Al-Buṣṭī says:

فأدر يزود حسنا وهو منتظم وليس ينقص قدرا غير منتظم

His accomplishment in beauty is multiplied.

His rank does not decrease and there is no disorder.<sup>51</sup>

Poetry - after fulfilling certain conditions - has the total blessings of Islam. Indeed the nature of Islam is such that it is a complete way of life, acting as a catalyst to accomplish the realities of life. It is a divine force that penetrates the core of the visible world. Undoubtedly the nature of Islam is such that it does not label the natural inclination of poets as something wicked. The poet creates a utopia by means of his perceptions, and he is contented with it. In contrast, Islam desires the reality of that utopia and works towards it. It works on all the perceptions to focus on the realities of the real world by proposing a sublime model.

Islam does not abhor poetry nor does it wage a war against art, as might be initially understood. Islam is against the road which poetry and art has followed: the path of whims and fancies, and agitation which is uncontrolled; it is against the path of drowsy irre realities



which keep its adherents occupied and unconscious of its true nature. On the contrary, if the soul settles down and accepts the path of Islam, and when its perceptions become absorbed with Islamic principles of poetry and art, and works at the realisation of those noble ideals in the real world, then certainly the soul will be at ease. Islam demands that the poet be not contented with the creation of imaginary worlds and living in them. The Islamic attitude to poetry is one which focusses the attention of the heart and the mind to the Creator, since this is the only reality.<sup>52</sup> The early Islamic poet Labīd has summed up this relationship beautifully:

ألا كل شيء ما خلا الله باطل

Verily, everything except Allah is perishable.<sup>53</sup>

On what grounds then do the poets justify their presence in Islamic literary culture? The mandate is given by the Qur'ān itself: Verse 227 of Sūrah Al-Shu'arā (among others) is a long exceptive verse which lifts the sanction from Muslim poets; it reads:

Except those who believe, and do righteous deeds, and remember Allah much, and defend themselves only after they are wronged. And soon will those who oppress know what vicissitudes their affairs will take.

(Al-Qur'ān XXVI. 227)

The above verse is a straightforward reference to Muslim poets. These poets are not included in the general description of poets. They are believers and their hearts are charged with the power of faith. Their lifestyles are regulated and are in harmony with the teachings of the Qur'ān. They are not satisfied with fantasies and dreams. Instead, their endeavours are directed at the realities of the physical and metaphysical world as portrayed by Islam. Most of their poetry revolved around such themes as: the unity of Allah, His praise and obedience, good preaching, and awakening of desires concerning that which is with Allah (t.a.). A central theme that ran through many of their poems was that of love of Allah (t.a.): the need to increase one's love for Allah (t.a.) accompanied by a decrease of love for everything else.

A close examination of the actual circumstances in which verse 227 was revealed may assist us in determining the scope of this verse. It has been reported on the authority of Abū Ḥasan Salīm that when verses 224-226 of Chapter XXVI were revealed, 'Abd Allāh bin Rawāḥah, Ḥassān bin Thābit and Kab̄ bin Mālīk came lamentfully, saying:

O Messenger of Allah, indeed Allah has revealed these verses and He knows that we are of the poets. We are doomed for destruction.

Thereupon Allah revealed verse 227.<sup>54</sup> It may be pointed out that the reference in the exceptive verse is primarily to the Muslim poets contemporary to the Prophet, especially the three poets (all from the

Khazraj): Ḥassān bin Thābit, Ka'b bin Mālīk and 'Abd Allāh bin Rawāḥah, of whom the first was the most distinguished. This is the well known Trio that defended the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and Islām in Madīnah. Ibn 'Abbas, commenting on this verse (227) is of the opinion that: "They are Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Alī and 'Abd Allāh bin Rawāḥah (r.a.)."<sup>55</sup> The early Islamic scholars were generally agreed that the poets referred to in the exceptive verse (227) were primarily the Muslim poets engaged in composing poetry in defence of Islam and the Prophet (p.b.u.h.). However, all subsequent Muslim poets fulfilling the conditions in verses 227 may also qualify to be included in its definition.

Verse 227 (of Chaptr XXVI) begins with the phrases "illallazīna amanū wa 'amiluṣ-ṣāliḥāti" ("except those who believe and do righteous deeds"). The commentators of the Qur'ān are agreed that this is a direct reference to the Muslim poets. The exegetes are not unanimous on what is meant by "wa zakarullāha kathīran", "and remember Allah much". After entertaining two possibilities, namely, the poets' mention of God either in speech or in poetry, Ṭabarī concludes that a correct interpretation must include both.<sup>56</sup> This is possible. But "wa zakarullāha kathīran" is not a set phrase quite like the two preceding ones "illal - lazīna amanū wa 'amiluṣṣāliḥāti", whose meaning is crystal clear, and whose inclusion in an exceptive verse which describes a Muslim poet is perfectly understandable. A close examination of "wa zakarullāha kathīran" is therefore necessary to bring out its significance, and discover its relevance.

Zikr is one of the basic and profound traits which vibrate in the structure of Qur'ānic and Islamic thought. Its inclusion in the exceptive verse is probably related to its place on this level of Qur'ānic thought and not only to the mere verbalization of the name of the deity in speech or poetic composition. This interpretation is evidenced by the circumstances which attended the Prophet's decision to allow Muslims to compose poetry. After some thought on how Muslims could compose poetry against the Meccans, the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) finally permits Ḥassān bin Thābit to compose and fortifies him with the assurance that "the Holy Spirit" will be with him.<sup>57</sup> This assurance involved the freedom of the Muslims poets from the protection or jurisdiction of "shayāṭīn" and jinn. The Muslim poet belonged to a distinct category in the supernatural order. The source of poetic inspiration for the Muslim poet was not the vicious and malevolent "shayṭān", but associated with "the Holy Spirit" and so indirectly and ultimately with God. In contrast to the Arab poet who was jinn - possessed, the Muslim poet was God-possessed. To the Arab poet that accepted Islam, this transference entailed an effortful act during the creative process; namely, to see to it that his inspiration was coming not from the old, familiar source - the "shayṭān", but from God, and that it continued to flow from that source. Understood against this background, the "zikr" mentioned in the Qur'ānic verse take on its deeper significance. Moreover, the very text of the Muslim poet was supposed to be one in which Allah is frequently mentioned. Calling on God's name comes out not as a mechanical formula, but as a basic call necessary for the Muslim poet to repeat (frequently,

"kathīran") in order to keep firm his new affiliations, lest he should backslide or revert to old wells of inspiration presided over by the "shayāṭīn". The "zīkr" emerges as a form of "isti'āzah", a taking refuge in God from the power or hold of the "shayṭān".

The wording of verse 227 continues with the verb "wantaṣarū", meaning "And defend themselves". An accurate translation of this verb, "intaṣarū", is essential for extracting some valuable information on the Qur'ānic regulations which governed the composition of poetry by Muslims.

"Intaṣarū" can have a number of significations which are made clearer by the preposition which sometimes follow it. In this case it is not followed by one, and thus the precise significance of "intaṣarū" has to be inferred. The context provides a perfect guide for what the verb should signify in this case. The Muslim poets are said to have "intaṣarū" after they had been wronged "ẓulimū", and this gives the clue. The preposition to be understood with "intaṣarū" is "min", which gives the word "intaṣarū" the meaning of "revenged themselves". The Muslim poets revenged themselves, but only after they had been wronged. This is consonant with the Qur'ānic concept of revenge, punishment, and retaliation.<sup>58</sup> The phrase, "after they had been wronged", explains that the "revenge" of the Muslim poet was indulged in, only in retaliation, a concept accepted in the Qur'ān and applied there to the field of poetic composition. It is interesting to note that another verse, verse 41 in Sūrah XLII, is very relevant, as it uses the verb

"intaşara" after "zulm". In this verse, the meaning is perfectly clear as "revenged himself", especially when contrasted with the preceding verse (40).

This interpretation is consonant with well-known facts about the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and the Muslim poets. After the poets had been denounced in the Qur'ān, it was difficult for the Muslims to compose poetry as long as the sanction remained operative. The exceptive verse, in its four parts, solved the problem, in that it allowed only such poets as were described therein, to compose. This part which begins with "intaşarū", lays emphasis on a particular type of poetry - the "hijā", the scathing satires which Muslim poets at Madinah were allowed to compose. This type of poetry was generally repugnant to the spirit of Islam but which the Qur'ān sanctioned under the constraints of the new circumstances. The poetry comprised prior to this was mostly of a political nature and described the battles of Islam, but at this juncture in 627 A.D. the Meccan poets seemed to have intensified their attacks against the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), and thus ripostes to them called for a Qur'ānic revelation, which gave Muslim poets formal authorisation to retaliate.<sup>59</sup> Poetry composed in the course of the preceding five years presumably was not "hijā", and so did not need special authorisation, or possibly had been authorised by the first three clauses of the exceptive verse, which according to this possibility, could thus have been revealed early in the Medinese period for lifting the ban on the composition of poetry expressed in verses 224-226.

Verse 148, in Sūrah Al-Nisā (IV), amplifies the Qur'ān's attitude to this problem: "God likes not the shouting of evil words unless a man has been wronged". It needs to be remembered that the Muslim poets satirised only those who satirised them. They did this without exceeding the proper bounds, as has been pointed out in some of their works: "They defended themselves in the manner as they were wronged."

The exceptive verse (verse 227 of Chapter XXVI) concludes with a severe warning "And soon will those who oppress know that vissions their affairs will take". This verse focusses on the obstinacy and haughtiness of the polytheists, their disdain towards threats, and their haste in a path that is doomed to destruction. Here the linking of "and soon will they know" with "those who oppress" emphasises a very strong threat. The pious forbears used to admonish on these lines. Abū Bakr r.a ended his last testament with this quotation when he nominated 'Umar r.a. to be his successor:

And every person shall get what he earned. "And soon will those who oppress know what vissions their affairs will take".<sup>60</sup>

The explanation of oppression with "kufr" is fairly widespread in the Qur'ān. The early commentators generally defined oppressors as those who ascribed partners unto Allah and satirised the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.).

It is interesting to note that these words of verse 227 (Chapter XXVI): "And soon will those who oppress know what vicissitudes their affairs will take" is similar to another Qur'ānic verse: "On the day when the oppressors' excuse will not be of any use to them" (Qur'ān XXX. 57). In Islamic literature the words "ẓulm" oppression and "kufr" are often interchangeable. Those who disbelieve are regarded as "al-lāzina ẓalamū anfusahum" "those who oppress their own selves"; they deny themselves the comforts of the divine way of Islam, and in its place they opt for other patterns of life that are fated to ruin. The early scholar Qatādah is of the opinion that the oppressors mentioned in verse 227 refers to the poets and others.<sup>61</sup> The early commentators are of the opinion that this clause (of verse 227) refers to the oppressive polytheists, the people of Mecca. It may be argued that this verse is a general reference to all oppressors. The oppressors, especially the poets among them, are reminded that their "joy" is in fact blissful ignorance confined to the short span of the life of this world, and in the hereafter they are to experience a "turning over". Their wheel of fortune is destined to make a turn towards a point of absolute misery.

From the aforementioned it is clear that there existed basically two groups of poets in the era of the Prophet: the non-Muslim poets whose poetry was founded on a false ideology; and the Muslim poets who were supposed to compose "Islamic poetry". "What makes poetry Islamic?" has been the subject of much heated discussion throughout the history of Arabic literature. However, there is sufficient consensus



among scholars to enable us to arrive at a broad definition of "Islamic poetry". The poetry composed by the Companions of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) offers a perfect guide as to the essential traits of "Islamic" poetry. Early Islamic poetry fulfilled one (among others) primary objective - it strengthened the bond between the individual and God. It was inclusive of topics like the unity of God, praise of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and his Companions, and themes pertaining to the Qur'ān and practices of the Prophet. The following verse composed by Labīd is a classical example of the portrayal of traditional themes:

Yea, the righteous shall keep the way of the righteous,  
and to God turn the steps of all that abides;  
And to God you return, you too: with Him only rest the  
issues of things and all that they gather.<sup>62</sup>

It would be fair to conclude that the objectives and contents of a poem determine to what level a poem is Islamic. Islamic poetry need not be only a poetry of defence and repulsion, it need not be only a direct call to accept Islam or glorifying it. It is not confined to the history of Islam and its men. Islamic poetry certainly demands that the poem serves as a medium to increase the ties/closeness between the listener, the reader and God. However, once this condition is fulfilled, the avenues of themes available to the poet are almost infinite. Indeed it is impossible for the Muslim poet to be insensitive to the irresistible attractions of natural phenomena. For example, the poet's reflecting on the night as it blankets the earth and then withdrawing to allow for the awakening of the morning, this

natural cycle is instantly perceived by the poet's super-sensitive perceptions, leaving him stunned in admiration. Nay, it is in fact food for his soul. The Muslim poet ascribes this phenomenon to Allah, and this surely is Islamic poetry in its total reality.

The various Qur'ānic verses relating to poetry had tremendous repercussion on Arabic literature, and its ripple effects flowed well into the present century. Here was a revolution in poetry that changed the lifestyle of the Arabs. It brought a noble lifestyle full of progress in the religious, intellectual, social and political spheres. It eliminated the zeal for the Jāhilī way of life among the Arabs and dealt a death blow to the spirit of clannish affiliations in them. Arabic poetry now turned its back to Al-Lāt, Al-Manāt and Al-'Uzzā. It now moved on a course directed towards Allah. This theme of discarding ones belief in the old false gods, received much attention from the early poets. An example of this can be seen in the following poem by Zuhair:

So who is going to announce to Ka'b, are you going to blame it  
false, and he, it is more resolute?  
To Allah, not Al-'Uzza nor Al-Lāt, He alone, you will be saved and  
be at peace when safety will be offered  
On the day when none will be saved and none will escape the fire  
except the one that's pure of heart and one that submits.  
And the religion of Zuhair, his religion is nothing, and the  
religion of Abu Sulmā is sublime, sacred.<sup>63</sup>

This re-orientation of poetry towards Islam was quickly established among the early Islamic poets. They ensured that poetry be a medium for the glorification of Islam and the Prophet (p.b.u.h.). Islamic poetry now acquired a new poetic idiom and a different poetic emphasis. Islam had introduced a new rational order of symbols at variance with the emotional order of symbols prevalent in the poetic heritage of the period. Disorientation was considerable. Like all other members of the community, the poets were concerned about their changed world, and the way they should look at it. The uncertainty of their reaction, especially in the period beginning with the Qur'ānic censorship of poets, is evidenced by their recurrent consultation with the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and his Companions on matters of conduct and attitude.<sup>64</sup> The poetry of the early Islamic period had to accommodate all aspects of experience and fit them into a unified whole. The poetry of this period, however, could not be expected to encompass all the stages of development at once. Although the Qur'ānic condemnation of pre-Islamic poets is severe, it needs to be remembered the Qur'ān did not at any time categorically label the whole body of pre-Islamic poetry as null and void. The early Muslim scholars did attach some importance to the collection of pre-Islamic poetry. For example, there was a need (in the early Islamic period) to interpret the language of the Qur'ān by resorting to texts from pre-Islamic poetry. The famous Companion of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), 'Abdullāh bin 'Abbās (d. 70/689), is said to have been the first to use pre-Islamic

poetry to do this. This attitude is shown in the tradition attributed to Ibn Rashīq (d. 1070) to Ibn 'Abbās, who was universally admired for his knowledge and his skill in commenting on the Qur'ān:

"Whenever you read something in the Book of God and do not understand it, look for it in the poetic composition of the Arabs, for poetry is the archive of the Arabs." He himself, when asked about something from the Qur'ān, used to recite a poem about it.<sup>65</sup>

From the above, it's manifest that Ibn 'Abbās and other "ulamā" did seek the help of old poetry to interpret the "gharīb" of the Qur'ān and the traditions that grew around it.

While the Qur'ān's attitude to poetry was made crystal clear by its verses and the "Aḥādīth" (sayings of the Prophet p.b.u.h.), there arose a problem that was to remain a topic of much heated discussion among literary circles for centuries: it involved the poet's freedom to change reality. This for example was Ibn Rashīq's opinion:

A poet ("shā'ir") is called this because he perceives ("sha'ara") what others do not. For if the poet did not form a concept or invent one, or did not embellish an expression or give it an original twist, or did not expand the concepts others treated clumsily, or shorten the expression others made expressively long, or use a concept in a different way than it had been used before, then the name of poet would be given to him in a figurative sense and not in a real one, and he would not possess any merit other than that of metre, which in my opinion has no merit at all, in spite of the conciseness (it imposes).<sup>66</sup>

Ibn Rashīq's opinion, however, referred concretely to an aesthetic perception. The poet may be said to see reality in a different, subjective way, independent of the truthful sincerity of objectivity.

In this way the acceptance of a poet's freedom to change and transform reality, as he saw it, entered into Arabic literary criticism. The famous encyclopedist Al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505) commented even in his time on the Qur'ānic condemnation of poets in the following terms:

Thus it is in no way befitting God's Apostle - may God have mercy on him and grant him peace! - to compose poetry. For poetry has some prerequisites without which no man can be called a poet. That is to say that even if a man composed a harmonious and rhythmic discourse, paying careful attention to the truthful objectivity ("ṣidq") in it without exaggerating, exceeding proper limits, lying, or presenting objects that do not exist at all, nobody would call him poet and what he said would be poetically cheap and of inferior quality. One learned man has said, when asked about poetry, "That if it is jocular, it makes you laugh, and if it is in earnest, it lies. Thus the poet finds himself between the lie and laughter. And if such is the case, God has to free His Prophet - may God have mercy on him and grant him peace! - from these two vices as from every other low thing. Moreover, most poets (we see) either compose empty panegyrics or satires full of foul speech, and such attributes do not suit the Prophet."<sup>67</sup>

The presence of the poetic lie enhancing the beauty of a composition, was a view shared by the majority of literary critics. However, the history of Arabic literature always witnessed scholars of the opinion that artistic beauty in poetry could still be achieved minus the poetic lie. Generally, the notion of poetry as a lie and of the poet as a liar, was retained throughout the centuries as one of the traditional characteristics of poetry in an absolute sense as in Ibn Rashīq: "In poetry the lie about something, whose ugliness everybody accepts, is beautiful"<sup>68</sup>, or in a relative one showing the pre-eminence of poetry as in Ibn Abū Al-Ḥadīd (d. 1257): "In poetry a lie can be beautiful, but it never can be in prose."<sup>69</sup> Yet the praise of the poetic lie shows that moral and ethical values were no longer applied here. The Qur'ānic censorship of poetry may be summed up in one word, "purification". Arabic poetry during the period of Revelation underwent a process of filtration: the harmful elements in it were initially separated and then discarded. At no stage did the Qur'ān order a complete cessation of the art of poetic composition. The Qur'ānic verses relating to poetry serve as an adequate manual for the Muslim poets. However, a study of these verses can never be complete without a discussion on the interpretation of these verses by an authority sanctioned by the Qur'ān itself, the Prophet (p.b.u.h.). The spirit of the Qur'ānic verses, their demands, and their implications on the attitude and conduct of the poets, can be best seen in the attitude of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and his Companions towards poetry.

REFERENCES

1. Ta'rikh Ibn Khaldūn, Vol. II, p. 7.
2. Al-Zamaksharī: Kashshāf, pp. 36, 69.
3. Al-Suyūṭī: Itqān, Vol. II, p. 120.
4. 'Umdah, Vol. 1, p. 30.
5. Al-Asqalānī: Fatḥh Al-Bārī, Vol. X, p. 444.
6. M.T. Darwīsh: Fī al-Naqd al-Adabī 'inda Al-'Arab, p. 291.
7. See Fatḥh Al-Bārī, Vol. X, p. 448.
8. M.G. Haydar: "Islam and poetry", in Fikr wa Nazr, XIX, p. 45.
9. Sīrah ibn Hishām, I, p. 337.
10. Ibid, p. 366 subs.
11. See Al-Qur'ān XXXVII. 36. The "mushrikīn" of Makkah were not prepared to enter into any serious discussion concerning their religion. When invited to the way of life of the Qur'ān they found it most convenient to dismiss it as the production of a "mad poet".
12. Sīrah Ibn Hishām, I, p. 2889.
13. V. Cantarino: Arabic poetics in the Golden Age, p. 28.
14. Tafsīr Al-Kāshif, V, p. 524.
15. See Nazm Al-Durar, XIV, pp. 112, 113. Here Al-Bīqā'ī goes to lengths in describing the varied activities of "shayāṭīn" in their communication with the poets.
16. C. Wendell: "The pre-Islamic period of Ṣirāṭ Al-Nabī", in The Muslim World, LXII, p. 113.

17. Cf. Qur'ān XXXVII. 6 - 10, in which the jinn, here called "rebellious satans" are described as reaching the lowest heaven where they try to hear the deliberations of the High Council (Al-Mala Al-A'lā), and are pelted with shooting-stars that drive them off. Also CXXII. 8-9.
18. Al-Bīqā'ī: Naẓm Al-Durar, XIV, p. 112.
19. See Al-Nawawī: Tafsīr Al-Nawawī I - II, p. 119. The early commentators of the Qur'ān were unanimous in their conclusion that almost all prophecies of the poet proved untrue. The eavesdropping of the "shayāṭīn" on the angels may account for their occasional prophecy coming true.
20. R.B. Serjeant: "Early Arabic prose", in A.F.L. Beeston (gen. ed.): Arabic literature to the end of the Umayyad period, p. 123.
21. Al-Baydāwī: Anwār al-tanzīl wa asrār al-ta'wīl, Vol. II, p. 134.
22. Ibn Ḥabīb: Munammaq, p. 113.
23. See Al-Qur'ān LIII. 18 - 21.
24. Tafsīr Al-Kāshif, V, p. 523.
25. M.T. Darwīsh: Fī Al-Naqd Al-Adabī 'inda Al-'Arab, p. 290.
26. See A.B. Al-Jaṣṣāṣ: Aḥkam Al-Qur'ān, Vol. III, p. 348.
27. Tafsīr 'Uthmānī, p. 488.
28. The Qur'ān, tr. Richard Bell, II, p. 362.
29. A.J. Arberry: The Qur'ān interpreted, II, p. 75.
30. Tafsīr Al-Ṭabarī, XIX, p. 127. On pages 127-128 he includes, in the denotation, all the candidates: human beings, "shayāṭīn" and jinn.
31. I. Shāhid: "A contribution to Korānic exegesis", in Arabic and Islamic studies in honour of Hamilton A.R. Gibb, p. 569.



32. M.M. Hījāzī: Al-Tafsīr al-Wāḍiḥ, II, p. 77.
33. Alfred Guilleme, trans.: The Life of Muḥammad, p. 90.
34. See Fath Al-Bārī, Vol. X, p. 445.
35. I. Shāhid: "A contribution to Korānic exegesis", in Arabic and Islamic Studies in honour of Hamilton A.R. Gibb, p. 571.
36. Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr, II, p. 665.
37. Ibid.
38. Fī ṣilāl Al-Qurʾān, V, p. 2621.
39. Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr, II, p. 663.
40. Rūḥ Al-Maʿānī fī tafsīr Al-Qurʾān Al-ʿAẓīm, Vol. XIX, p. 146.
41. Jalāl Al-Dīn Al-Suyūṭī: Al-Durr Al-Manthūr, Vol. V, p. 99.
42. Rūḥ al-maʿānī fī tafsīr Al-Qurʾān Al-ʿAẓīm, Vol. XIX, p. 146.
43. Tafsīr Al-Qurʾān Al-ʿAẓīm, Vol. III, p. 353.
44. Ibn Rashīq's well-known passage on the great honour in which their poets were held by the Arabs may also be consulted in R.A. Nicholson, A literary history of the Arabs, p. 71.
45. For these passages or verses, see Sūrah Al-Baqarah, II, 23-24; Sūrah Yūnus, X, VV. 37-39; Sūrah Hūd, XI, V. 13; Sūrah Al - Isrā, V. 88; Sūrah Al-Qaṣaṣ, XXVIII, 49-51; Sūrah Al-Ṭūr, LII. 33-34.
46. There is in "tafsīr" books what could be construed as an explicit statement that the poets did actually take up the challenge. In his commentary, Zamaksharī speaks of four Meccans poets and Umayyah bin Abī Ṣalt of Al-Ṭāʾif, who, according to statements ascribed to Ibn ʿAbbās and Muqātil, said, "naḥnu naqūlu mithlamā qāla Moḥammad." Zamaksharī applies this to verse 224 in his explanation or commentary on the term "al-shuʿarā" in that verse.

47. I. Shāhid: "Another contribution to Korānic exegesis, the Sūrah of the poets (XXVI)", in Journal of Arabic Literature, XIV, p. 10.
48. See, for instance, Ibn Rashīq, Al-'Umdah, ed. M.M. 'Abdulḥamid (Cairo, 1955), pp. 22-25.
49. For Al-Farazdaq and the Umayyad Caliph Sulaymān, see Kashshāf, Vol. III, p. 131.
50. Put together by Ibn Sallām; see Ṭabaqāt, Vol. I, pp. 233-257.
51. M.T. Darwīsh: Fī Al-Naqd Al-Adabī 'inda Al-'Arab, p. 292.
52. Al-Bīqā'ī: Naẓm Al - Durar, Vol. XIV, p. 115.
53. Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī, Vol. VIII, p. 43. Also quoted in Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Vol. IV, p. 1768.
54. Rūḥ al-ma'ānī fī tafsīr Al-Qur'ān Al-'Azīm, XIX, p. 147. See also Faṭḥ Al-Bārī, Vol. 8, p. 445.
55. Ibid.
56. Jāmi' al-Bayān, Vol. XIX, p. 130.
57. See Aghānī, Vol. IV, pp. 147-150.
58. I. Shāhid: "A contribution to Korānic exegesis", in G. Makdīsī (ed.): Arabic and Islamic Studies in honour of Hamilton A.R. Gibb, p. 575.
59. W. 'Arafāt also speaks of "the need for the systematic support of the poet" in EI, Vol. III, p. 272.
60. Rūḥ al-ma'ānī fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Azīm, Vol. XIX, p. 147.
61. Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr, Vol. II, p. 664.
62. C.J. Lyall: Translations of ancient Arabic poetry, chiefly pre-Islamic, p. 90.
63. A.R. Al-Bāshā: Shi'r al-da'wah al-Islamiyyah, p. 28.

64. Jalāl Al-Dīn Al-Suyūṭī: Al-Durr Al-Manthūr, Vol. V, p. 99.
65. Ibn Rashīq: ‘Umdah, Vol. I, p. 30.
66. Ibid, p. 116.
67. V. Cantarino: Arabic poetics in the golden age, p. 39.
68. Ibn Rashīq: ‘Umdah, Vol. 1, p. 22.
69. Ibn Abu Al-Ḥadīd: Al-Falak, p. 310.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE ATTITUDE OF THE PROPHET AND THE COMPANIONS TOWARDS

#### POETRY

"His character was the Qur'ān."

This short conclusion expressed by 'Ā'ishah r.a., the wife of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), summarises the life of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.). That the Holy Prophet (p.b.u.h.) was a living personification of the Qur'ān, is a fact not only endorsed by the Qur'ān itself, but accepted by all Muslims.<sup>1</sup> Hence the attitude of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) towards poetry is simply an endorsement of the Qur'ānic one. For those individuals still sceptical about the place of poetry in Islam, a critical study on the attitude of the Prophet and his Companions towards poetry reveals a sea of information highlighting the supreme support extended by the Prophet and the Companions towards the preservation of Arabic poetry.

The Prophet's attitude towards poetry was not categorical in its acceptance or rejection. Certainly he acknowledged the place of poetry in Islam, but the status and function of poetry had to change. The open licence accorded to Arab poets in matters of content, had to be withdrawn. If poetry had to be composed, it had to be poetry for Islam's sake. However, the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) himself was not a poet. The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) took strong exception to the attacks of the "mushrikīn" (of being a poet). Allah had already -

in the various texts in the Qur'ān that refer to or mention poetry or poets - stressed clearly Islam's condemnation of what was considered the wrongheaded function of the poets in their general mission: "And the poets, the perverse follow them" (Al-Qur'ān XXXVI. 24). No other religion has ever taken poets and their function in society so seriously.

In the early Islamic period the Muslims were primarily concerned with the memorisation of the Holy Qur'ān, its "i'jāz", the science of "Ḥadīth", and waging "jihād" against the "mushrikīn".<sup>2</sup> This continued almost till the end of 1 A.H. The ultimate result was that the volume of poetic production was greatly reduced, and so was the status of the poet.<sup>3</sup> This fact had led some scholars to assume that Islam had placed a blanket ban on poetry.

Did the early Muslims engage in a calculated campaign to destroy the body of Jāhili poetry? Certainly no. This accusation is based on doubtful motives. As mentioned earlier, the early Muslims, being involved in the establishment of Islam in the Arabian peninsula, found less time to engage their attention to poetic pursuits. After the demise of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) the situation with the Muslims remained the same. They were engaged in the defence of the faith and internal management of the government. Their major concern was the collection of Qur'ānic verses from various manuscripts, parchments and tablets.<sup>4</sup> Yet the early Muslim poets found time to memorise and preserve the body of pre-Islamic poetry. The process of recording the old Arabic poetry in a written form had, it is claimed, ground

to a halt, if indeed it had ever gone seriously under way, and much of the products of this poetry had been forgotten after a few generations. It was left to the Qur'ān, as the Divine Scripture revealed to the Arabs in their own language, to provide the impetus for the preservation of pre-Islamic poetry and the development of the Arabic literary language.<sup>5</sup>

Soon after the Prophet's death scholars felt a need to elucidate obscure words and formulations in the Qur'ān. For this purpose examples were required from other linguistic sources, and these could most readily be found in the older Arabic poetry which had hitherto remained a mainly oral tradition. Ibn 'Abbās r.a. used to say: "If you read something from the Book of Allah and you do not understand it, then look for it in the poetry of the Arabs, for verily poetry is the 'diwān' of the Arabs."<sup>6</sup> This evidence in turn provided the material for the dictionaries and grammars of later philologists. Indeed, an immediate interest in the poems themselves was a factor in all this. But the real impetus came from the exegesis of the Qur'ān.

The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) himself was the central figure in the development of the favourable Muslim attitude towards Jāhili poetry. The Companions have recorded numerous incidents where the Prophet inquired, listened to, or criticised Jāhili poetry. Once the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) inquired from one of the Companions about the content of their discussions in their private sessions during the Jāhiliyyah. He replied that they recited poetry and that they used to talk about

things relating to the Jāhiliyyah.<sup>7</sup> A further step in the development of the favourable attitude towards the old Arabic poetry was the legitimization of Jāhili verse. A Tradition attributed to the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) on the authority of Abū Hurayrah, states that the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) gave licence for the transmission of Jāhili poetry with the exception of two poems (one of Umayyah bin Abī Ṣalt, the other of Al-A'shā).<sup>8</sup> The same idea is reflected in Traditions that the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) used to sit with his Companions and listen to their recitation of pre-Islamic poetry, at times smiling (that is, with approval). Among the pieces recited in the presence of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) are verses of praise, of contemplation on life and death, of belief and piety; there are also some verses recited by women at a wedding celebration, and even a complaint of a poet deserted by his wife.<sup>9</sup>

Further evidence of the Prophet's favourable attitude to some pre-Islamic poetry is evident in the fact that the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) favoured certain pre-Islamic poets. Once when Imru'1 Qays was mentioned before the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), he remarked, "He was the captain of the poets and the bearer of their banner."<sup>10</sup> The general acceptance of selected Jāhili poetry is well illustrated in the following report by one of the Companions. 'Abd Al-Rahmān bin Bakrah reports, "I used to sit in the company of the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) with my father in the mosque, and they used to recite poetry and remember happenings of the Jāhiliyyah."<sup>11</sup>

At the dawn of Islam there were basically three parties of poets composing. The first group comprised of the "mushrik" poets, deep in their enmity and opposition to Islam. They simply detested the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and used the "hijā" at great lengths, trying to defame the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and lower the status of Islam.

Prominent among these were 'Abd Allāh bin Zibārā, Abū 'Izzah Al-Jumāhī and Abū Sufyān bin Ḥārith. The second group comprised those Muslim poets who expounded the teachings of Islam in their poetry, defended them, and at times composed satires against the "mushrik" poets.

The early Muslim poets gave expression to their poetic talents since the Hijrah.<sup>12</sup> This does not mean that the Muslims who accepted Islam before the Hijrah and then composed poetry, were not influenced by the Islamic element. The Muslims before the Hijrah were few in number. However, the task of defending Islam and propagating its beauties was left to the "Poets of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.)": 'Abd Allāh bin Rawāḥah, Ka'b bin Mālīk and Ḥassān bin Thābit.<sup>13</sup> Besides these, 'Abbās ibn Mardās and 'Abbās ibn 'Abd Al-Muṭṭalib also, on every occasion, defended the Muslims against the poetic attacks of the "mushrikīn". Yet a third party of poets during this period were those poets who did not defend Islam nor attack it. Some of them accepted Islam, while the rest remained as "mushrikīn". But never at any stage did these poets involve themselves in poetic disputes. The more famous among them were Labīd, Nuwayrah, Al-Khansā and Abū Mihjan.

It was within this poetic environment that the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) demonstrated his definite attitude towards poetry. Incidents



concerning the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) inquiring about poetry, certainly reflect a genuine interest in the poetic art. Once the Messenger of Allah questioned 'Abd Allāh bin Rawāḥah, "What is poetry?" He replied, "A thing that possesses the heart of a man, then he brings it on his tongue. That is poetry."<sup>14</sup> On another occasion 'Abd Allāh bin Rawāḥah was questioned about his method of poetic composition. The Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) asked, "How do you recite poetry, when you want to say (something) if you are astonished by that?" Ibn Rawāḥah replied, "I consider that, then I recite." Thereupon the Prophet requested, "It is your duty to deal with the "mushrikīn".<sup>15</sup>

The Prophet (p.b.u.h.), besides inquiring about poetry, went a step further. He had actually recited verses (composed by poets) on numerous occasions. Al-Barā reports that once the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) was digging up soil during the Battle of Trench, and in the process, his clothes became soiled up to waist level. The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) then recited these lines:

By Allah! Were it not for Allah we would not have received  
guidance,  
Nor would we have given alms, nor performed "ṣalāh".  
(O Allah) Grant us contentment of heart,  
and when we are confronted, make our steps firm.  
Indeed these people have committed excesses against us,  
when they intended mischief against us, we fought against it.<sup>16</sup>

Abū 'Amr ibn Al-ʿAlā relates to us another Tradition underlining the fact that the Prophet's special interest in poetry led him to recite on a number of occasions. Ibn Al-ʿAlā remarks: "Ṭarafah alone is the most poetic of them." He meant his "qaṣīdah" wherein he says:

مَوْنَةُ أَهْلِ بَرْقٍ تَهْمُودُ  
The ruins at Burqah Thahmūd are Khawlah's

An in it he says:

ستبدى لنا الايام ما كنت بامدك وياتيك بالاجبار من لم تنزود

The days show you what you knew not,  
and bring you stories of one they did not feed.

The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) recited this verse and said, "This is from the words of prophecy."<sup>17</sup>

Al-Bukhārī in his "Ṣaḥīḥ" mentions yet another occasion when the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) recited verses of Muslim poets. In a "Ḥadīth" attributed to Abū Hurayrah, the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) is narrated to have said, "A Muslim brother of yours who does not say dirty words, (and by that he meant Ibn Rawāḥah) said:

Amongst us is Allah's Apostle who recites His book in the radiant early morning time.

He gave us guidance and light while we were blind and astray, our hearts are sure that whatever he says will certainly happen.

He does not touch his bed at night (being busy in worshipping Allah), while the believers are sound asleep in their bed.<sup>18</sup>

Even in times of injury, the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) consoled himself with the recitation of poetry. In a "Ḥadīth" narrated by Jundub, the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) is reported to have injured his toe after stumbling across a stone. The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) then quoted the following verse:

هل أنت إلا إصبع دميت وفي سبيل الله لتيت

You are certainly a toe bathed in blood in Allah's way.<sup>19</sup>

Evidence of the Prophet's favourable attitude towards poetry is also visible in the numerous occasions when the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) listened directly to verses recited by poets. On one occasion Al-Nābighah Al-Ja'dī recited his "qaṣīdah" before the Messenger (p.b.u.h.), in which he says:

آیت رسول اللہ! جاء بالمری ویتلو کتابا کالمجری نیرا

I came to the Messenger of Allah when he came with the guidance,  
and he recites a Book that is like the galaxy, illuminated.

And when he recited:

بلغنا السماء مجرنا ووجدنا وإنا لنرجو فوق ذلك مظهرا

We reached the sky, our glory and fame,  
and surely we hope, beyond that, for a lookout.

The Prophet inquired, "Where to, O Abā Laylā?" He replied, "To Paradise". The Prophet added, "If Allah wills." And when

Al-Nābighah recited:

ولا خير في حلم إذا لم يكن له يوارثكمى صفوة أن يكررا  
ولا خير في سئل إذا لم يكن له حليم إذا ما أورد الأمر أمرا

There is no good in mercy if there is no  
haste to protect its clarity from turbidity.

There is no good in ignorance if there is no  
forbearance as quenched thirst returns.<sup>20</sup>

The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) fully appreciated Al Nābighah's endeavours at using poetry as a medium inviting towards Islam. Hence he prayed for him, saying, "May God not break your teeth!"<sup>21</sup>

The aforementioned incident concerning the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and Al-Nābighah, reveals a great deal concerning the Prophet's general

attitude towards poetry. The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) not only listened to Al-Nābighah's verses, he questioned him, spurred him to recite more, and finally prayed for him.

In this connection, Ibn 'Abd Rabbihi relates another "Ḥadīth" where 'Ā'ishah r.a. happened to be in the company of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), and she recited the following verses of Zuhayr bin Janāb:

ارفع ضعفك لا يحرك ضعفك يوما . فتدرك عواقب ما جنى  
 جزيك أو يثبي عليك فان من اثني عليك ما فعلت ممن بزي  
 Leave your weakness, its folly is not fit  
 a day lest the penalty you earn befall you.  
 One pays or praises you for,  
 you are praised for what you do as one pays.

At that the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) remarked, "He is right, O 'Ā'ishah. Allah does not reward one who does not reward men."<sup>22</sup>

Among the various incidents relating to the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) listening to poetry, the following incident concerning Ibn Salīm Al-Khazā'ī, is striking, for it clearly illustrates the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) being deeply moved at the end of a poetic recital. Once Ibn Salīm Al-Khazā'ī came to the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) asking for assistance. The Khazā'ah were allies of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.). The Khazā'ah had contracted a truce with the Quraysh. However, the Quraysh suddenly violated this truce and attacked a tribe of the Khazā'ah, the Banu Ka'b, killing many of their members and seizing their wealth. 'Amr then came forward to the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) and recited the following verses:

O Lord, indeed I am reciting verses to Mohammed,  
 the oath of our father and his father, time - honoured.  
 We had begotten them and they were the offspring,  
 then we accepted Islam, but did not withdraw the hand.  
 And they are debased and insignificant in number,  
 so help, may Allah guide you with His help, forever!  
 And call on the servants of Allah, they will offer assistance,  
 amongst them is the Messenger of Allah, they have renounced.  
 Verily they have humiliated him and his face has taken on a  
 glowering expression in a large military unit, like the sea  
 moving and churning.

When this recital terminated, tears began to flow from the eyes of  
 the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.), and he looked at a cloud and  
 remarked, "By Him who has sent me with the truth, as a prophet,  
 verily this cloud will begin helping the Banī Ka'b." Thereafter the  
 Messenger of Allah left with those who were with him to assist the  
 Banū Ka'b.<sup>23</sup>

In the study of Arabic literature, perhaps the most distorted account  
 concerning the Prophet's attitude towards non-Muslim poets, is the  
 incident concerning Ka'b bin Zuhayr accepting Islam. Indeed many  
 European scholars, and some erring Muslim scholars, have explained  
 Ka'b's accepting Islam simply because he was threatened with death  
 by the Prophet. The circumstances leading to this threat are  
 conveniently forgotten. In the following lines, an attempt will be  
 made to explain the actual circumstances leading to his accepting  
 Islam, his recital of his famous "qaṣīdah", "Banāt Ṣu'ād", and the  
 response of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.).

The Apostle of Allah (p.b.u.h.) once threatened Ka'b bin Zuhayr with  
 death, when Ka'b sent a message to his brother Bujayr, forbidding

him from accepting Islam. The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) expressed his anger, and then his brother Bujayr sent a missive to him saying:

Woe unto you The Prophet - God bless him and grant him salvation! - has threatened you with death for what has come to his ears of what you said. He has also threatened other people in Makkah that have run him down and annoyed him and he had them both killed - meaning Ibn Khaṭṭal and Ibn Hubābā - and the poets of Quraysh, such as Ibn Zibā'ra and Ḥubayrah ibn Abū Wahb, are still alive but have fled in all directions. Thus, if you care for your life, hurry to the Apostle of Allah - God bless him and grant him salvation! - for he does not kill whoever approaches him with repentance. Otherwise, look for safety any way you can, for he - by God! -, is going to kill you!<sup>24</sup>

Ka'b was completely at a loss because of this and went disguised to the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.). When the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) finished his morning prayer, Ka'b laid his hand on the hand of the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) and said, "Allah's Apostle. If Ka'b ibn Zuhayr should come with repentance and ask for protection, would you grant it to him, that I may bring him to you?" He answered, "He would be safe." Thereupon Ka'b uncovered his face and said. "May I ransom thee with my father and mother, O Apostle of Allah!, this is the place where he seeks refuge with you. I am Ka'b ibn Zuhayr." Then the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) granted him his protection, and thereupon Ka'b recited this "qaṣīdah" of his, which begins:

Su'ād has departed and thus my heart today yearns madly for her traces, and is enslaved without redemption.

saying in it after this lyric prelude and the mention of his great fear and wariness:

I was told Allah's Apostle had sentenced me  
 but his pardon was to be hoped for.  
 Respite! Your religion, which gave you the gift of the Qur'ān,  
 contains admonitions and distinctions.  
 Do not punish me because of slanderers' words,  
 for I did not sin, though I did speak too much.

The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) did not rebuke his word, nor promise in vain,  
 but forgave him and gave him his own robe, which Mu'āwiyah later  
 bought from him for 30 000 dirhams, or, as Al-'Utbah says, for  
 20 000.<sup>25</sup>

Many say - among them the poet 'Abd Al-Karīm ibn Ibrāhīm Al-Nuhshalī -  
 that the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) gave him, beside the robe, one hundred  
 camels. Later Al-Ahwaṣ reminded 'Umar ibn 'Abd Al-Azīz of the present  
 made by the Apostle of Allah (p.b.u.h.) to Ka'b, for he had been  
 hesitant about the propriety of making gifts to poets:

You have before you the gift of one hundred camels,  
 eight years of age and older, made to Ka'b for his poetry,  
 by the Apostle of Allah, with His light enlightened.  
 Peace be on him, morning and evening.<sup>26</sup>

The incident concerning Ka'b clearly illustrates the following:

1. Death threats issued by the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) were not directed  
 at all non-Muslim poets opposing the Islamic movement. These  
 threats were issued to a few poets whose opposition to the  
 Islamic movement exceeded all bounds. They were guilty of a  
 variety of grave offences: some stooped to the lowest levels  
 in defaming - by means of poetic compositions - the pure

personality of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.); while others, like Ka'b ibn Zuhayr, actively engaged in preventing individuals from accepting Islam.

2. Ka'b, though pursued by the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), had complete freedom to go into hiding, or even leave the Arabian peninsula. But he chose to approach the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and repent. He could have stopped at this point and remained a "mushrik". However, on his own free will, he opted for accepting Islam.
3. The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) displayed patience and appreciation when listening to Ka'b's ode, to the extent that he offered him a material reward.

Incidents concerning the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) patiently listening to "qaṣīdahs" of poets accepting Islam are numerous in the history of Arabic literature. Khallād bin Qurrah reports that once A'sha bin Qays came to the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), expressing his intention to accept Islam. He then recited a long "qaṣīdah" praising the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), expressing his relief at relinquishing the Jāhilī way of life, and committing himself to seriously following the Prophet (p.b.u.h.).<sup>27</sup>

From the aforementioned it is plainly evident that the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) had a deep interest in poetry, inducing him to inquire about, recite, and listen to poetry. This favourable attitude is further reflected in his frequent requests for the recital of verses



composed by Muslim and non-Muslim poets. Among these poets the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) had his favourites. Umayyah bin Abī Al-Ṣalt, for example, was a poet whose verses were generally favoured by the Prophet (p.b.u.h.). Perhaps it was his advocating of "tawḥīd" that was responsible for this attitude. Prominent among Umayyah's topics is the praise of Allah and the low value of the material world. Abu 'Amr bin Sharīd reports that he was once riding behind the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), and the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) asked, "Do you have any of Umayyah bin Abī Al-Ṣalt's poetry?" He answered in the affirmative. The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) then requested Abū 'Amr to recite. He recited a verse. Thereupon the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) requested him to recite more. This carried on till he recited one hundred verses.<sup>28</sup> Ibn Maddī also narrates the same "ḥadīth" but mentions that the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) further said, "Then he has almost accepted Islam in his poetry."<sup>29</sup>

A similar incident is related by Ibn Sīrīn who narrates that he was once travelling with the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) during the night, when the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) inquired, "Where is Ḥassan bin Thābit?" Ḥassan at once presented himself before the Prophet (p.b.u.h.). At the request of the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.), Ḥassān began reciting. The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) patiently listened until he terminated his recital. The Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) then remarked, "Verily this is stronger on them than the impact of arrows."<sup>30</sup>

The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) was fully aware of the merits of unadulterated poetic composition and its place in the Islamic movement, hence he frequently commented on the verses recited before him, and endorsed the beautiful ideas expressed. In this connection Yazīd ibn 'Ām ibn Muslim reports a narration attributed to his grandfather who said: I came to the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and a reciter recited the words of Suwayd ibn 'Amr Al-Muṣṭalqī:

Trust not even if you are in sanctuary,  
     for destiny on both sides of every man.  
 Go your way without any fear,  
     but every provision though it nourishes passes.  
 Good and evil are joined in a link.  
     With all this the days and nights come.

Thereupon the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) said, "If the Muslim attains this, he has submitted indeed."<sup>31</sup>

Al-Aṣma'ī narrates a similar incident concerning the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) listening to verses relating to "ibādah" and commenting on its virtues, using business terminology. Al-Aṣma'ī says: A man came to the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and said, "May I recite to you, O messenger of Allah?" He said, "yes". So he recited:

I left singing and the singing went,  
     I became addicted to prayer and meditation.  
 So attack the red in battle,  
     hate the heretics in the wars.  
 O Lord, do not deny my bargain,  
     I've sold my wealth and pledged my family.

The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) then commented, "A profitable bargain! A profitable bargain!"<sup>32</sup>

Indeed the Prophet's attitude towards poetry is one which reflects his appreciation of beauty in the art of poetic composition. And it is in beautiful speech that the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) excelled. Says Allah in the Qur<sup>ʾ</sup>ān: "You will make them know the melody of speech."<sup>33</sup> Once Al-ʿAbbās questioned the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) saying, "In what does beauty consist, O Messenger of Allah?" The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) replied, "In the tongue."<sup>34</sup> The Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) was the most excellent of all mortals in the art of eloquence. He was an Arab whose speech was excellent, and he had a taste for excellent speech. Were it not so, the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) would have not, in a number of places, gloried in himself for possessing it. He once said, "I am more eloquent than any other Arabic-speaking person."<sup>35</sup> Thus the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) almost inevitably became involved with poetry with the newcomers who accepted Islam, and he used to censure it. Hence it was nothing innovatory for people to discuss poetry in the presence of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), and poetic meetings with the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) abounded.

A "ḥadīth" of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) accurately reflects the love of poetry of the Arabs: "They will not give up poetry until camels give up yearning (for their resting places)."<sup>36</sup> Ibn Abi Al-Sā'ib Al-Makhzūmī expounded it in an utterance very much to the point: "By Allah, were poetry banned, we would be punished at court several times every day (that is, for reciting it)."<sup>37</sup>

The actual words of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) serve as the best source in estimating his attitude towards poetry. Fortunately, this attitude

is expressed in a simple straight-forward language. This characteristic is evident in all his "aḥādīth". However, the following "ḥadīth" is striking, for in one sentence, it expresses his general attitude towards poetry. The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) is once reported to have said, "Indeed poetry is a mode of expression ("kalām"), and in "kalām" there is the good and the ugly."<sup>38</sup> On another occasion he was asked to comment on poetry. He remarked: "The good in it is good; and the ugly in it, is ugly."<sup>39</sup> Another utterance attributed to the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) permits poetry if its aim is to gain justice from oppression, to gain means of deliverance from poverty and expression of gratitude for a favour received.<sup>40</sup>

The Prophet's advice of selecting the good and ignoring the ugly in poetry, has also been explained by Ibn Rashīq. Ibn Rashīq, in his "Umdah", after a chapter "On the excellence of poetry", adds another "In reply to those who abhor poetry." It is made up of traditions attributed to the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) himself, his wife 'Ā'ishah r.a., and his Companions. Their defence of poetry is based on, among others, a moral relativism, as one can see in a saying attributed to the Prophet (p.b.u.h.): "Poetry is a speech compound (of various things), whatever is in agreement with truth, is beautiful; whatever is not, lacks any goddness."<sup>41</sup>

The Andalusian, Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, in his famous "Al-ʿIqd Al-Farīd" (The unique necklace), had already defended poetry, as others had with similar statements. His opening passage on "The merits of poetry" deserves special mention:

One of the proofs of the important rank occupied by poetry in the opinion of the Arabs and the revered role it had in their hearts is that when the Prophet - God bless him and grant him salvation! - was sent the Qur'ān, unique in its arrangement, perfect in its composition, and the people of Quraysh became astonished at what they heard. They exclaimed: "That can only be sorcery!" And they said about the Prophet - God bless him and grant him salvation! -: "He is a poet for whom we await Fate's uncertainty?" (Al-Qur'ān LII. 30). This is the same Prophet - God bless him and grant him salvation! - who was once delighted by 'Amr ibn Al-Athimm's discourse and he remarked: "That is indeed captivating eloquence!"<sup>42</sup>

From the preceding lines it is plainly evident that the view once widely held that Moḥammad (p.b.u.h.) and Islam discouraged poetry and the poets, is now generally discredited. One needs only to examine the relationship between the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and Ḥassān to discover his deep awareness of the value of poetry in defending Islam. The Companions have recorded a number of "aḥādīth" wherein he encouraged Ḥassān to compose poetry, assuring him of Allah's help. The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) used to implore Allah: "O Allah, strengthen him with the Holy Spirit!"<sup>43</sup> The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) also used to say to Ḥassān, "Recite (poetry). The Holy Spirit is with you."<sup>44</sup> A similar "ḥadīth" is also reported from Jābir, who relates that the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) said on the "Day of the Parties" ("yaum al-aḥzāb"): "Who will defend the honour of the Muslims?" Ḥassān replied: "I". The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) then said: "Stand up (and) satirise them, for verily the Holy Spirit will assist you."<sup>45</sup> 'Ā'ishah r.a. also reports a related "ḥadīth". She relates that she heard the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) saying to Ḥassān: "Verily the Holy Spirit will not cease to assist you in your defence of Allah and His Messenger (p.b.u.h.)."<sup>46</sup> Indeed it is glaringly evident that the Divine hand

was available to assist Ḥassān in his major role as the chief poetic defendant in the Islamic movement.

The Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) was very conscious of the element of wisdom in poetry. This is evident in a number of "aḥādīth" recorded by the Companions. Ubay ibn Ka'b narrates: Allah's Apostle (p.b.u.h.) said: "Indeed there is wisdom poetry."<sup>47</sup>

The Companions (and all Muslims in general) were to benefit not only from the wisdom in poetry. Indeed the art of poetic composition could - subject to certain conditions - very easily become acts of "ibadah". Al-Daylamī reports on the authority of Ibn Mas'ūd, traceable in ascending order of traditonaries to the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) that: "The poets who die as Muslims will be commanded by Allah to recite poetry, and the choice virgins of Paradise who will be their mates, will put it to music. And those who died in "shirk", will be invited to distress and destruction in Hell."<sup>48</sup>

The lofty status occupied by poetry in the "majālis" of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) is reflected in the following report by Abū Bakr r.a.. Says Abū Bakr r.a.: I was with the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), and there was a poet before him reciting. So I said to him, "How is that? Qur'ān and poetry?" "Sometimes Qur'ān, and sometimes poetry", answered the Prophet.<sup>49</sup>

Among the narrations portraying the Prophet's attitude to poetry, the following narration by Salāma bin Al-Akwa' deserves special

mention, for, in one incident, it reveals the Prophet being attracted to a particular poem, listening attentively to it, praying for the poet, and prophesying the special reward reserved for the poet in the hereafter. Salāmā bin Al-Akwa' narrates:

We went out with Allah's Apostle (p.b.u.h.) to Khaybar and we travelled during the night. A man amongst the people said to 'Āmir bin Al-Akwa', "Won't you let us hear your poetry?" 'Āmir was a poet, and so he got down and started (chanting "ḥudā") reciting for the people, poetry that keeps pace with the camel's footsteps, saying:

O Allah, without you we would not have been guided on the right path,  
neither would we have given in charity, nor prayed.  
So please forgive us for what we have committed. Let all of us be sacrificed for your cause.  
When we meet our enemy, make our feet firm,  
Bestow peace and calmness on us.  
And if they all call us towards an unjust thing, we will refuse.  
The infidels have made a hue and cry to ask others for help against us.

Allah's Apostle (p.b.u.h.) said, "Who is that driver?" They said, "He is 'Āmir bin Al-Akwa'." He said, "May Allah bestow mercy on him." In the course of the battle 'Āmir died through an accident with his own sword. Some Muslims then expressed doubts about his righteousness. The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) then dispelled these suspicions and said, "'Āmir will have double reward." (While speaking) the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) put two of his fingers to indicate that and added, "He was really a hard-working man and a "mujāhid", and rarely has there lived in it (i.e. Madīnah or the battlefield) an Arab like him."<sup>50</sup>

The Prophet's involvement with poetry involved a wide spectrum of activities. Poetry, for example, was recited by the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and his Companions when they transported materials during the construction of the Prophet's Mosque at Madīnah.<sup>51</sup> In another

report, the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and Ibn Rawāḥah are reported to have recited poetry to raise their spirits during the construction of the Mosque. Says Ibn 'Abbās: The Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) was building the mosque and 'Abd Allāh bin Rawāḥah was saying:

أَفْلَحَ مَنْ يَخَافُ الْمَسَاجِدَ

Successful indeed is the one that concerns himself with the mosques. The messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) then repeated the same. Ibn Rawāḥah continued:

يَتْلُو الْقُرْآنَ قَائِمًا وَقَاعِدًا

He recites the Qur'ān standing and sitting.

The Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) repeated the same.<sup>52</sup>

If one had to select just one "ḥadīth" to illustrate the position of poetry in Islam, then the following "ḥadīth" related by 'Ā'ishah r.a., must certainly be the one. 'Ā'ishah r.a. reports that the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) kept a pulpit in the mosque for Ḥassān, who used to stand on it, praise the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) and defend him. And the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) used to say that verily Allah strengthens Ḥassān with the Holy Spirit in his defence and praise of the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.).<sup>53</sup>

From the preceding lines it is clear that poetry occupied a definite place not only in Islam in general, but also in the mosque: a place reserved for "ibādah". This is of particular significance for it automatically implies that (selected chaste) poetry may be labelled "ibādāt." This fact is well illustrated in the following incident in the Mosque of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.). Once a party from the



Banū Tamīm came over to the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), asking for an oratorical and poetic contest with the Muslims. After Al-Zabarqān of Banū Tamīm had recited some couplets, Ḥassān bin Thābit, at the request of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), recited some verses. The awe of the Banu Tamīm is reflected in the words of one of their men, Al-Aqrā': "Verily this man (the Prophet) has incited his people so well, that surely his poet is better than our poet, and their speech is better than ours."<sup>54</sup>

The Prophet's strong attitude against the "mushrik" poets was based on many circumstances and reasons. It was important for him to state the difference between himself and his action on one hand, and their activities on the other; contrasting Allah's message against the poetic celebration of false idols. His object was to reject an alleged analogy of inspiration (suggestion by the jinn and other supernatural forces) and to set in opposition the deep religious and ethical earnestness of his word to secular poetry of a vapid, boastful and licentious nature. Hence the critical remarks concerning poetry were directed at a set body of poetic compositions which, besides being un-Islamic, propagated a way of life in which the moral element was almost completely absent.

Viewed against this background, the "aḥādīth" of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) condemning poetry, become more understandable. It is reported on the authority of Abū Hurayrah that the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) once said, "It is better that the belly of a man be filled with pus, infecting the belly and destroying it; than it be filled with poetry."<sup>55</sup>

Abu Sa'īd Al-Khudrī also narrates a similar "ḥadīth", saying: We were walking with the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) at Araz, when lo!, a poet came singing. Then the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) said, "Take hold of the devil or (he said) stop the devil. To fill up the belly of a man with pus is better than to fill it up with poetry."<sup>56</sup> The compiler of "Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim" expresses doubts about the authenticity of this "ḥadīth".<sup>57</sup> However, the early scholars, Al-Bukhārī for example, generally accept this as a sound "ḥadīth". All of them are agreed that the criticism contained in this "ḥadīth" was directed at those poets who immersed themselves in poetry to such an extent that it hindered them in their major function of being the "servants of Allah".

The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) took strong exception to poets whose poetry was pregnant with exaggeration and oppression. Ibn Mas'ūd reports that the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) once said, "May those who exaggerate be destroyed!" He repeated it thrice.<sup>58</sup> Indeed there

was no place for exaggeration in the verses of Muslim poets. In another "Ḥadīth" narrated in the "Ṣaḥīḥ", the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) is reported to have said, "Beware of oppression, for verily oppression is the darkness of the Day of Resurrection."

Although this "ḥadīth" may apply to oppression generally, Qatādah is of the view that it refers specifically to the poets and others, like the people of Makkah, whose poetic attacks amounted to sheer defamation and oppression.<sup>59</sup> As for those poets who exceeded all bounds of moderation in their verses and simply indulged in nuisance against the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and the Companions, they deserved the death

sentence. It is related by Qutaylah bin Al-Naḍir bin Al-Hārith that the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) ordered 'Alī r.a. to have her father killed after he increased his nuisance against the Prophet (p.b.u.h.). He was captured on the Day of Badr, and 'Alī r.a. killed him.<sup>60</sup>

The Muslim poets were constantly reminded to exercise control over their poetic recitals. In this regard Abū Umāmah reports the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) as saying, "Shame and control of tongue are two branches of faith, and obscenity and 'bayān' are two branches of hypocrisy."<sup>61</sup> Whenever the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) heard any utterance which was not true, or which bordered on exaggeration, he immediately rectified it. The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) was not a poet, but it was a customary habit of his to correct much of the poetry composed by Muslim poets. For example, when Anas bin Zanīm said:

أَنْتَ الَّذِي تَمْرِي مَعَهَا بِأَمْرَهَا

The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) added "ma'an", and

بَلِ اللَّهُ يَهْدِيهَا

The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) acted in this manner because he was "Al-Hādī" (one who guides), and guidance was his primary concern. The correction was made to prevent any exaggeration occurring.

Once 'Ā'ishah r.a. attended a gathering where young girls were playing the "daf" and were reciting poetry relating to incidents during the battle of Badr. When they recited:

وَفِينَا نَبِيٌّ يَعْلَمُ مَا فِي غَدٍ

And amongst us is a Prophet who knows what is to happen tomorrow,

The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) stopped them, saying, "Recite that which you were reciting earlier."<sup>62</sup> Though the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) possessed knowledge of the future, he prevented these girls from delving into the subject for fear of exaggeration.

Such was the strict censorship of poetry enforced by the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) that an eminent poet like Ḥassān, whose poetry was the standard of classical Arabic poetry, had to make major adjustments to his poetry after accepting Islam.

The primary aim of the early Muslim poets was "al-da'wah ila Allah", inviting towards Allah, and defending the faith from its enemies. The Islamic poets concerned themselves with directing satires against the enemies of Islam during the Prophet's lifetime, and against the false claimants of prophethood in the time of Abū Bakr r.a. Poetry was used to great advantage in raising the spirits of soldiers on the battlefield. The Muslim poets also engaged in "rithā", elegiac poetry, lamenting those who were martyred while fighting with the Prophet (p.b.u.h.). In the battles of Badr (2. A.H.), Uḥad (3. A.H.), and Khandaq (7. A.H.) the Muslim poets: Ḥassān bin Thābit, Ka'b bin Mālīk and 'Abd Allāh bin Rawāḥah excelled in motivating the soldiers to fight in the way of Allah, and lamenting those who were martyred. Verses praising the Muslim "mujāhidīn" were also recited when the Muslims were victorious over the Persians and Romans.<sup>63</sup>

The Companions of the Prophet viewed poetry as an effective medium to record historical events and propagate Islam. When the Prophet

(p.b.u.h.) entered the Ka'bah in triumph, and destroyed the idols therein, the poet Rashīd bin 'Abd Allāh Al-Sulamī recited:

She said: Come to have a love prattle. I said: No. Allah  
and Islam forbid you to do so.  
Did you not see Moḥammad and his tribe at the conquest  
(of Makkah) when the idols were broken?  
Then you would have seen that the light of Allah is full of  
light, and "shirk" is gone into oblivion.<sup>64</sup>

Similarly, when the news of the Prophet's conquest of Makkah spread all over Arabia, Khuza'iy of the Muzaynah tribe, the guardian of the idols of Nuhm, recited:

I went to Nuhm in order to offer a sacrifice as I used to do.  
I said to my soul: Beware, is this God? Have you no sense?  
I refuse to admit, my faith is now the religion of Moḥammad  
(p.b.u.h.) whose God is the God of heaven, the Exalted, the  
Benovelent.<sup>65</sup>

Among the non-Muslim poets who worked relentlessly to discredit the mission of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) were the poets of the Quraysh: especially, 'Abd Allāh bin Zibā'rā, Hubayrah bin Abi Wahb Al-Makhzūmī, Musafī' bin 'Abd Manāf and Abu 'Izzah Al-Jumāḥī; and from the Banū Thaḳīf, Umayyah bin Abi Al-Ṣalt. They used to say, "Our sayings are like the sayings of Mohammed (p.b.u.h.)." These poets used to recite satirical verses before the various Arab tribes that assembled to listen to them.<sup>66</sup> These poets were simply living in a world of "bāṭil", a world of falsehood and fantasies. Their poetic standards were based on these untruths.<sup>67</sup> Nay, they were responsible for tarnishing the beautiful image of poetry. In this regard, Ibn 'Ubayd

says, "wa sa ya'lamu-llazina zalamo ayya munqalabiy-yanqlibūn" (al-Qur ān XXVI. 224), are the ones that have ruined the art of poetic composition."<sup>68</sup>

In the early Islamic period - the period before 1 A.H. - the Muslim poets did not compose satires to defend themselves against the satires of the "mushrikīn" of Makkah. The Companions now became impatient because of the distorted image of Islam created by the "mushrik" poets. The poets among the Companions now began seriously urging the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) to allow them to compose satires in defence of the Islamic movement. In this regard, Al-Barā reports that it was once said: "O Messenger of Allah, verily, Abū Sufyān bin Al-Harth bin 'Abd Al-Muṭṭalib satirises you." Thereupon Ibn Rawāḥah stood up and asked, "O Messenger of Allah, permit me (to reply)." The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) said, "You are the one who recites 'thabbata llāho?'" Ibn Rawāḥah said, "Yes, O Messenger of Allah." Ibn Rawāḥah then recited:

ثَبَّتَ اللَّهُ مَا أَعْطَاكَ مِنْ حَسَنٍ تَثْبِيْتِ مُوسَى وَنَصْرًا مِثْلَ مَا نَصَرَا

Allah has strengthened what he has granted to you, in goodness, the strengthening of Musa, and help, as He has helped.

The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) prayed, "May Allah make you like that!" Then Ka'b asked, in a similar manner, permission to recite, and it was granted. Finally Ḥassān got up and said, "O Messenger of Allah, permit me (to reply to it)." The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) replied, "Go to Abū Bakr r.a. He will relate to you an account of the people, their days, and their descent. Satirise them, and Jibrīl is with you,"<sup>69</sup>

Moḥammad bin Sīrīn relates a similar "ḥadīth." Says Ibn Sīrīn: The Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) and his Companions were satirised (in particular) by three of the unbelievers of the Quraysh: Abū Sufyān bin Al-Ḥarth, 'Amr bin Al-'Aṣ and Ibn Al-Zibā'rā. A person said, "Perhaps I may, by way of satire, defend ourselves from these people that have satired us." 'Alī r.a. replied, "The Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) gave me permission and I did it." The man said, "O Messenger of Allah, permit me. Perhaps I could defend us, by means of satire, against these people who have satirised us." His request was not granted. The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) then addressed the Anṣār, saying, "What prevents a people that have helped the Messenger of Allah with their arms and their own selves, from helping him with their tongues?" Thereupon Ḥassān said, "I am ready for it, O Messenger of Allah." Hassan then expressed his determination to propagate the Islamic cause, even if it meant travelling "from Baṣrā (in present-day 'Irāq) to Sana'a (Yemen)." The Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) said to him, "How will you satirise them while I am with them (in lineage)?" Ḥassān replied, "I will separate you from them as a strand of hair is removed from dough."<sup>70</sup>

The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) had now given the Muslim poets permission to compose satires in defence of Islam and the Muslims. It is reported on the authority of Anas r.a. that the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) said, "Strive against the "mushrikīn" with your wealth and yourselves and your tongues."<sup>71</sup> Another "ḥadīth" narrated by Al-Barā r.a. quotes the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) saying to Ḥassān, "Satirise them (the "mushrikīn"), and (be aware that) Jibrīl is with you."<sup>72</sup>

In the eyes of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) the pure versification of the Muslim poets was accepted as "jihād". The "mujāhid" Muslim poet was likened to the "mujāhid" on the battlefield, whose swift arrows inflicted much injury to the enemy. It is reported on the authority of Ka'b bin Mālīk that the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) once said to him, "Satirise them. By Him in whose hand is my life, it is stronger against them than (the shower of) arrows."<sup>73</sup> The father of Ka'b bin Mālīk relates: When it (verse 224 of Chapter 26) was revealed, I came to the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) and said, "O Messenger of Allah, what is your opinion concerning poetry?" The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) replied, "Indeed a believer is one who strives with his sword and his tongue. And by Him in whose hand is Moḥammad's soul, it is like showering them with arrows."<sup>74</sup> Ibn Sīrīn and 'Ā'ishah r.a. also report "a ḥadīth" to this effect. Yet another "ḥadīth" on this topic is related by Anas r.a., who mentions that the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) once said, "Leave them alone, O 'Umar. It is swifter on them than the showering of arrows."<sup>75</sup>

The early Muslim poets were conscious of the fact that they received the help of Allah, and the blessings of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) in their poetic endeavours. In 2. A.H. Ka'b bin Malik recited:

بِنَصْرِ اللَّهِ رُوحَ الْقُرْسِ فِيهَا وَمِيكَالَ فَيَا طَيْبَ الْعِلَادِ

With the aid of Allah Jibrīl and Mikā'il are in our midst,  
and how good they are!<sup>76</sup>

And Ḥassān said:

وَجِبْرِيلُ أَمِينُ اللَّهِ فِينَا وَرُوحُ الْقُرْسِ لَيْسَ لَدُنْكَ كُفَاءُ

And Jibrīl, the trustee of Allah, is in our midst.<sup>77</sup>



Three Anṣār poets specialised in satirising the Quraysh. They were the famous trio: Ḥassān bin Thābit, Ka'b bin Mālīk and ʿAbd Allāh bin Rawāḥah.<sup>78</sup> Ḥassan and Ka'b criticised the "mushrikin" in matters of history and achievement. ʿAbd Allāh bin Rawāḥah used to condemn them for their "kufr", stating that no state in life could be lower than that of "kufr". Ḥassān and Ka'b reached great heights in their satirical compositions. In the later Medinese period Ibn Rawāḥah excelled in his satires against the Quraysh.<sup>79</sup> However, the Muslim poets kept well within the limits of moderation, and their satires were free from exaggerations and lies.<sup>80</sup> In the opinion of Qatādah, the exceptive verse (v. 227) of Al-Shuʿarā was a direct reference to these poets that contended with the satires of the "mushrikīn".

Ḥassān bin Thābit was the most accomplished Anṣār poet. Ḥassān had become a Muslim and a poet of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) since the early days of the Hijrah.<sup>81</sup> The "Muhājirūn" and the "Anṣār" relied heavily on Ḥassān to defend the honour of the Muslims. Ḥassān excelled in fulfilling his role as the Prophet's chief poet. The Quraysh were extremely concerned about the satires composed by Ḥassān.<sup>82</sup> Ḥassān's expert knowledge of the history of the Arabs, his natural disposition towards poetry, and above all, the divine help he received, contributed towards making his satirical compositions without parallel in his time. The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) is reported to have stated in a number of "aḥādīth" that the divine help of Jibrīl will be with him in his satirical compositions against the Quraysh. In this regard, Ibn Saʿd reports on the authority of Ibn Buraydah that Jibrīl assisted Ḥassān bin Thābit in seventy verses in his poetic compositions in praise of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.).<sup>83</sup>

Ḥassān also excelled in composing elegies. When Zayd bin Thābit departed from this world, Ḥassān composed an elegy on him. Among the lines Zayd recited, are the following:

فمن ألقوا في بعد حسن وابنه ومن للمعاني بعد زير بن ثابت

Who will recite poetry after Ḥassān and his son?  
And after Zayd bin Thābit who will make  
conclusions of various affairs?<sup>84</sup>

Ḥassān joined the forces of 'Uthmān r.a. during the period of unrest<sup>85</sup> and he recited a number of impassioned odes; bewailing him, expressing disgust at his murder, and satirising his assailants. These were reverberating verses revolving around revenge and war.<sup>86</sup> The following is a verse of Ḥassān, threatening the adherents of 'Alī, after the murder of 'Uthmān r.a.:

لتسمعن وشيكا في ديارهم : الله أكبر ، يا ثارات عثمان

Soon you will hear in their home: Allah is great,  
O rebels of 'Uthmān!<sup>87</sup>

It is apparent that Islam sanctioned the art of poetic composition on many different occasions. Ḥassān bin Thābit, for example, composed verses in praise of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), in defence of the Islamic movement, satirising the "mushrikīn", and apologising for his errors. Once Ḥassān bin Thābit apologized for what he had said in connection with the calumny, telling 'Ā'ishah r.a. in some verses composed in her praise:

Chaste and well - composed, she is not suspected of evil,  
but falls victim to ignorant accusations.

saying also in them:

If I said what you claim,  
may my fingers never raise my whip again!

then added:

Indeed, what has been said is just not so,  
but only the words of a slanderous man.

It is evident that Ḥassān apologised using a sophism about a matter in which the death sentence given by the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) had been executed. He claimed that to be only the words of a slanderous man; meaning, intrigues.<sup>88</sup>

Much has been written, especially by Western scholars, on Ḥassān's Islamic poetry having a bald style. Once Ḥassān himself was questioned by Abū Al-Ḥusam, who commented: "Your poetry has become 'soft' (or old) in the Islamic period." Ḥassān replied: "O my nephew, verily Islam prevents one from lying, or forbids lying. And verily poetry embellishes lying." Al-Aṣma'ī also commented on Ḥassān's poetry as having dropped in standard after his accepting Islam. Al-Aṣma'ī criticises it using the verb "lāna", "to become soft, or deficient".<sup>89</sup> The early Muslim scholars on the contrary, accept his poetry composed during the Islamic period as the model for all later generations of Arab poets. This polarisation of attitudes is due to differences in standards of literary criticism. If Ḥassān's verses were to be viewed with the spectacles of Jāhili principles of literary criticism, then

indeed Al-Aṣma'ī's conclusion of it becoming "lāna" (soft/deficient) is befitting. Viewed in the light of Islamic standards of literary criticism, Ḥassān's poetry appears excellent. If there was one single factor that was responsible for the radical change in Ḥassān's poetic compositions, it was the influence of the Qur'ān. Ḥassān bin Thābit chose to drop the rude and vile Beduin style in favour of the new Islamic style of poetic composition which was dictated by the pure inimitable style of the Qur'ān.

When the Muslim poets composed poetry they concerned themselves with topics like the oneness of Allah, His praise, wisdom, good preaching, "zuhd", good habits and customs, the praise of the Messenger Allah and his Companions, and the futility of materialism.<sup>90</sup> Poetry was now an accepted medium for the broadcasting of basic Qur'ānic teachings. The Muslim poet committed himself to the propagation of truth, protecting his country and defending it, and praising those worthy of praise.<sup>91</sup> His verses were not soiled with misdeeds and deficiencies. He was not like the ordinary poet who recited the "ghazal" and rhapsodized about beloved women and youth, the one who invited towards immorality; and if his recital was a literary work of art, then the first part was praiseworthy, while the second part was deficient.<sup>92</sup>

The status of Jāhilī poetry was greatly reduced in the early Islamic period. Few panegyrics were composed and these were almost completely devoid of exaggeration. Likewise, the output of satires decreased, and obscene language in the few satires became less evident.<sup>93</sup> The

"ḥamāsah" poem was used mainly for religious exaltation. In the "ghazal" the traditional erotic "nasīb" was also cleansed of shameful idioms and phrases. The new Islamic poetry abounded with similes, proverbs, wise quotations and more often, inciting one to attain noble traits of character.<sup>94</sup>

The influence of the Qur'ān and "Ḥadīth" was even present in the satires composed by the Muslim poets. Their satirical compositions were a natural act of defence against the satires directed at them by the "mushrikīn", and it was sanctioned by the Qur'ān:

لا يحب الله الجهر بالسوء من القول إلا من ظلم

Allah does not love that evil be broadcast, except by one who is oppressed.<sup>95</sup>

The satires of the Muslim poets were devoid of enmity. They were in conformance with the following verse of the Qur'ān:

فمن اعتدى عليكم فاعتدوا عليه بمثل ما اعتدى عليكم

Then whoever acts unjustly against you, then attack him in the same manner.<sup>96</sup>

Further evidence of the strong influence of the Qur'ān can be seen in the fact that since 1. A.H. we find the poets using the "beautiful names of Allah" which were known in the Jāhiliyyah, like: "Allah", "yā Allah" (O Allah), "Rabb" (Lord) and "Al - Raḥman" (the Benificent). From 2. A.H. the poets began using names of Allāh that were not known before the revelation of the Qur'ān, like: "Ra'ūf" (Compassionate), "Zi'l-arsh" (Possessor of the Throne),

"Mawlā al-mu'minīn" (Master of believers) etc. Ḥassān bin Thābit, for example, used the word "rasūl" in its two possible contexts: its old linguistic meaning and its new Islamic meaning, in consecutive verses:

Is he not the most concerned Messenger,  
for any blame against him is washed away by his fulfilment.  
And you have pledged allegiance to the Messenger, and he was  
excellent and brought unto you fortunes.

Similarly, 'Abd Allāh bin Rawāḥah says:

You are the Prophet, and who will deprive himself of his  
intercession on the Day of Reckoning when Fate will have  
him belittled.<sup>97</sup>

"Madḥ Al-Nabī" (poems in praise of the Prophet, p.b.u.h.) received much attention during the early Islamic period. The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) was lavishly praised in the verses of the Companions, due to their extreme love for him. However, their poetry was never devoid of truth and reality, and exaggeration was non-existent. Nay, it was extremely difficult for them to exaggerate in their "madḥ Al-Nabī", as Ibn Farīd explains:

I am of the opinion that every praise showered on the Prophet  
is still incomplete;  
Even if one exceeds praise on him, his rank is even higher.<sup>98</sup>

The poetry of this period did not lose any of its artistic qualities. It became less formal and more functional. There is harmony in style

and content, as reflected in the following lines of Ibn Mardās,  
praising the Prophet (p.b.u.h.):

I see you, O best of creations in all aspects,  
you have spread the Book, which has been revealed  
with truth well - known.  
You have enlightened with proof, a secret affair:  
and you have extinguished with proof, a  
blazing fire.<sup>99</sup>

The Arab's ties with poetry were almost unbreakable. The following narration by Ibn 'Abbās bears testimony to the fact that selected chaste verses were frequently recited in the Mosque of Madīnah. Ibn 'Abbās narrates that he used to recite poetry, and at times also request someone else to recite, in the mosque. It is reported that he once called upon 'Umar bin Rabī'ah Al-Makhzūmī to recite the ode which begins with:

أَمِنْ آلِ نَعْمَى أَنْتَ غَادِ غِبْكَرَ غَدَاةٍ غَدَا أَمْرًا نَحْمِ فَهَجْرَ

Al-Makhzūmī recited the ode, which comprised almost ninety verses, till the end. Ibn 'Abbās then repeated the entire ode. He had, in fact, memorised it in just one attempt.<sup>100</sup>

It was a natural impulsive habit of the Arab to compose verses. It is reported by Anas r.a. that when the "Muhajirūn" and "Anṣār" began digging the trench (during the Battle of Khandaq), they recited:

نَحْنُ الْبَزِيْجُ بَايَعُوْا مُحَمَّدًا  
عَلَى الْجَبَارِ مَا بَقِيْنَا أَبَدًا

We are the ones who have pledged allegiance to Moḥammad in "jihad", and this pledge will remain for the rest of our lives.

The Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) was touched by their overriding spirit, and replied thus:

اللهم لا عيش إلا عيش الآخرة  
فاغفر الانصار والمهاجرة

O Allah! Life is only for the Heerafter,<sup>101</sup>  
so forgive the "Anṣār" and "Muhājirūn"!

The "Hijrah" was another topic with which the Muslim poets concerned themselves with. In 3. A.H. Abd Allāh bin Jahsh composed the following verse, referring to the event of the "Hijrah", when the "mushrikīn" conspired against the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.):

And your removing from the mosque of Allah, its people,  
so that they may not be seen prostrating before Allah  
in the House.<sup>102</sup>

The customary habit of Arabs reciting verses on accepting Islam was also followed by Hamzah r.a. The following verses were recited by Hamzah r.a. before the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), expressing his intention of becoming a Muslim, and showing deep gratitude to Allah for guiding him to the light of Islam. Hamzah r.a. recited:

I praise Allah for guiding my heart  
to Islam and those that are pure.  
Verily the "dīn" has come from the great Lord  
who is well acquainted with His servants and kind to them.  
When His message is recited to us  
those possessing sound understanding and judgement  
shed tears.  
The message Aḥmad (p.b.u.h.) has come with its guidance,  
with verses whose letters are clear.  
And Aḥmad (p.b.u.h.), the chosen one amongst us, is obeyed;  
so do not address him with any rough talk.  
Therefore, by Allah, we cannot submit to a people  
without our swords settling the matter.<sup>103</sup>



One of the general effects of the Qur'ānic censorship of poetry was that poets became less concerned with poetry; instead they became occupied with Qur'ānic studies. Among these was Labīd bin Rabi'ah, who was one of the poets of the "Mu'allaqāt". Labīd composed very few verses after his conversion to Islam. These verses express a feeling of genuine religious piety and have specifically Qur'ānic echoes.<sup>104</sup> This is particularly true of the work he produced later in his life on the subject of longevity.<sup>105</sup> Labīd's deep concern with God, as the Absolute Reality, is manifest in the following verses:

Yea, the righteous shall keep the way of the righteous,  
and to God turn the steps of all that abides;  
And to God you return, you too: with Him only,  
rest the issues of things and all that they gather.<sup>106</sup>

The favourable attitude towards poetry is represented in "ahādīth" stating that the four Righteous Caliphs were poets, that they either quoted verses or listened to recitations of poems.<sup>107</sup> Al-Sha'bī says, "Abū Bakr (r.a.) used to recite poetry, and 'Umar (r.a.) used to recite poetry, and 'Alī (r.a.) was most poetic of them."<sup>108</sup>

Abū Bakr r.a. was fond of poetry and eloquence in general, and during the Jāhiliyyah he recited poetry. After Abū Bakr r.a. accepted Islam he composed little poetry.<sup>109</sup> His great love for poetry is evident in the following statement of his: "The Arabs will not give up poetry unless the camels are stripped of their faculties of craving."<sup>110</sup>

Abū Bakr r.a. was an expert on the genealogy and history of the Arabs. This fact was acknowledged by the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) himself. The Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) is reported to have said, "Refer to Abū Bakr. Verily he is the most knowledgeable among you in (the field of) genealogy." Ḥassān, on the advice of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), often approached Abū Bakr r.a. to get a better understanding of the lineage of the Arabs. In reply, Abū Bakr r.a. used to say, "Leave so and so, and mention so and so." The Quraysh were always fearful of Ḥassān's satires; and at times they used to say, "Verily Abū Bakr's presence is evident in this poetry."<sup>111</sup>

As in the case of the other Companions who composed poetry, Abū Bakr r.a. composed verses relating to the major teachings of Islam. The following verses are part of a poem composed by Abū Bakr r.a., explaining the mission the Prophet (p.b.u.h.):

A truthful Messenger comes to them, but they deny him  
and say, "You are not to stay with us."  
And when we invite them to the truth, they turn their backs  
and growl incessantly, breathing heavily, in their dens.  
And how many of our kinsmen among them have come forward to us  
and have given up their way of life and turned towards  
something unoppressive.<sup>112</sup>

During the era of the Righteous Caliphs the various delegations of the Arabs continued arriving in Madīnah, either to inquire about or accept Islam. Often the Caliphs became engrossed in the poetic discussions of these delegations. Among the Caliphs ʿUmar bin Al-Khaṭṭāb, in particular, had an excellent knowledge of poetry and was very cordial in his relationship with the poets. Once while

talking with the delegation of Chatfān, he asked, "Which of you poets is the one who recites:

اتيتك عاريا، خلقتا بي على خوف نظني بي الظنون

I came to you naked, with worn coat,  
in fear as the suspicious suspected me."

They replied, "Al-Nābighah". 'Umar r.a. then asked, "Which of your poets is the one who says:

حلفت فلم اترك لنفسك ريبة وليس وراء الله للمرء مذهب

I swear I leave no doubt to your soul;  
besides Allah, there is no (other) recourse."

They replied, "Al-Nābighah". 'Umar r.a. then remarked, "This person is the most poetic of your poets."<sup>113</sup> Al-Nābighah was preferred by 'Umar r.a. mainly because of the strong Islamic message expressed in his verses, and his excellent command of the art of poetic composition.

'Umar's deep interest in poetry can be seen in the following narration by Abū 'Abd Al-Raḥmān Al-Nīsābūrī. Al-Nīsābūrī relates that once 'Umar ibn Al-Khaṭṭāb asked Ka'b Al-Aḥbār, after the latter had mentioned poetry, "Ka'b, have you found in the Tora any reference to poets?" Ka'b replied, "In the Tora I find a people from among the sons of Ismā'īl a.s., in the beginning of whose line I am, who speak wisely and form proverbial maxims, and we do not know of any others but the Arabs."<sup>114</sup>

‘Umar r.a. did not exercise any restraint in his censorship of vile poetry. This is apparent in his relationship with the poet, Al-Huṭay’ah. ‘Umar r.a. made it difficult for poets to earn a living through evlogizing patrons and attacking their enemies.<sup>115</sup> Once ‘Umar r.a. had Al-Huṭay’ah imprisoned because of the vainglorious content of his verses. While praising or satirising a person, he used to exceed all bounds of moderation, attributing qualities which did not really exist in the person. After a period of time ‘Umar r.a. had him freed. At the time of his leaving, ‘Umar r.a. remarked: "Al-Huṭay’ah, I fear that you may yet be sitting with some Quraysh lad who will have a young donkey for you to sit on, and he will say: 'Al-Huṭay’ah, recite some song!' And you will again interfere with the respect and honour of people." Zayd bin Aslam reports that after some time he himself saw Al-Huṭay’ah sitting with ‘Ubayd Allāh bin ‘Umar, who had provided him with a young donkey for him to sit on. ‘Ubayd Allāh bin ‘Umar requested, "Al-Huṭay’ah, sing something!" Thereupon he began singing. Ibn Aslam then interjected, saying: "Al-Huṭay’ah, haven't you remembered ‘Umar's words?" Al-Huṭay’ah turned cold and replied, "May Allah have mercy on ‘Umar! If he were alive today, we would not be doing anything like this."<sup>116</sup>

The place of poetry in Islam is well illustrated in the following incident involving ‘Umar r.a. and ‘Abd Allāh bin Rawāḥah. Anas bin Mālīk reports that when the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) entered Makkah to perform the "‘Umrah al-qaḍā" (the concluding "‘Umrah"), Ibn Rawāḥah was walking in front of him and he was reciting (verses beginning with the following):

The tribe of unbelievers have withdrawn from His path;  
today we will attack you with His revelation.

At this, 'Umar r.a. remarked, "O Ibn Rawāḥah! In front of me is the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.), and you are reciting poetry in the "Ḥaram" of Allah?" Thereupon the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) replied, "Leave him alone, O 'Umar. Indeed it is swifter on them than the showering of arrows!"<sup>117</sup> In the eyes of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) the poetic recitation of Ibn Rawāḥah was not only permissible, but it was encouraged, and accepted as a powerful medium to express the message of Islam.

Like the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), 'Umar r.a. did not have any patience with those non-Muslim poets who used the poetic licence to indulge in sheer obscenity. This can be seen in the incident involving Suḥaym. He was a Black Nubian slave of the Banū Ḥashās. It was said that 'Umar r.a. ordered that he be killed because of his obscene verses.<sup>118</sup> However, Suḥaym met his fate with the Banū Al-Ḥashās who had him killed because he involved their women in his "ghazals".<sup>119</sup>

'Umar's intolerance to poets who exceeded the limits of moderation can also be seen in his relationship with his governor, Al-Nu'mān bin 'Adī bin Naḍlah. 'Umar r.a. had appointed Al-Nu'mān to a post in Baṣra. Once he composed verses in praise of 'Umar r.a. 'Umar r.a. then reprimanded him in writing, for saying things which (according to 'Umar r.a.) were not really in him.<sup>120</sup> In his message 'Umar r.a. also quoted the first three verses of "Sūrah Al-Mu'min" of the Holy

Qur'ān. ʿUmar r.a. then called him to his presence and explained the reason for his reprimand, saying that the poets were guilty of saying things which they did not do.<sup>121</sup>

Once ʿUmar r.a., during his reign as Khalīfah, came into contact with the Roman Emperor, Heracleus. During this correspondence ʿUmar r.a. sent a delegation, which included Ḥassān, inviting Heracleus to accept Islam. During the course of the meeting between the Muslim delegation and Heracleus, Ḥassān recited some verses which touched the emperor. Ḥassān was rewarded with 500 dinars and 5 silk brocades. ʿUmar r.a. questioned the delegation on their return. In the discussion the leader of the delegation, Juthāmah bin Masāḥiq, mentioned Ḥassān's acceptance of a gift. ʿUmar r.a. had him severely reprimanded for this act.<sup>122</sup>

In another incident involving ʿUmar r.a. and Ḥassān, it was the former that erred. ʿUmar r.a. once passed by Ḥassān who was reciting poetry in the Mosque of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.). ʿUmar became angry, seized him by his ear and said, "Is it (not) froth like the froth of the camel?" Thereupon Ḥassān replied, "Spare us from you, O ʿUmar. By Allah, verily you know that I used to recite verses in this mosque, in the presence of him who is nobler than you." ʿUmar r.a. remarked, "You have spoken the truth", and then proceeded on his way.<sup>123</sup>

ʿUmar's interest in poetry did not merely involve his reprimanding and correcting poets. ʿUmar r.a. commented on the virtues of poetry, announced his famous poets, requested for verses to be recited, and

he himself often recited verses. 'Umar bin Al-Khaṭṭāb's special regard for poetry is reflected in the following quotation of his:

The best work of a man is verses of poetry. He introduces them in his argument. He influences a noble heart by them and he bends an evil heart by them.<sup>124</sup>

'Umar r.a. showed great respect to the poetry of Zuhayr and Al-Nābighah. This attitude is demonstrated in the following conversation reported by Ibn 'Abbās. Ibn 'Abbās relates:

One night, while 'Umar (r.a.) was walking towards a pool during the first battle he fought, he said to me, "Shall I tell you who is the most poetic of poets?" I said, "Who is he?" He replied, "The one who says:

And if only people perpetuate praise, they become eternal;  
But the people praise without being inclined." I said, "That is Zuhayr." He said, "He is the most poetic of poets." I asked, "Why is he the most poetic of poets?" He replied, "Because he was not repetitious in his speech, and he avoided poetry, and he praised a person (only) for what (quality) he possessed."<sup>125</sup>

Zuhayr's verses contained many beautiful qualities which attracted 'Umar r.a.. His verses abounded with smooth expressions and realistic descriptions. Zuhayr avoided strange words and excessive praise. 'Umar r.a. preferred Zuhayr in matters of form and content; he was particularly impressed by Zuhayr's moderation. 'Umar r.a. was one of the first critics that concerned himself with form and content in texts. He excelled in the exercise of testing through examination.

However, the most encouraging aspect of his literary taste was its complete conformity with the commandments of the "sharī'ah".

‘Umar's preference for Zuhayr is endorsed in yet another incident related by Ibn ‘Abbās. Once ‘Umar r.a. questioned Ibn ‘Abbās, "Recite to me from the most poetic of men who does not carry over from the rhymes and does not seek odd words." Ibn ‘Abbās asked, "Who is that, O "Amir Al-Mu'minīn"?"; to which ‘Umar r.a. replied, "Zuhayr ibn Abū Salmā." <sup>126</sup>

The following verses are part of a poem recited by ‘Umar r.a. on the occasion of the Conquest of Makkah:

Have you not seen how Allah has made his "din" victorious  
over every (other) "din" before that, deviant?  
And has strengthened it with the people of Makkah, after  
they had plunged themselves in transgression. <sup>127</sup>

‘Umar's verses covered a wide variety of topics: he composed verses on the fear of Allah, death, and even on wearing a new garment. The following lines concerning death, were once recited by ‘Umar r.a.:

You threaten me Ka‘b, thrice,  
there is no doubt about what Ka‘b has said.  
And how could I have the fear of death when I myself am dead,  
but the fear of the sin appears after the sin. <sup>128</sup>

On another occasion ‘Umar r.a. reprimanded a person for inviting him to a sinful act. ‘Umar r.a. exclaimed:



Shame on you, indeed the scope of the affairs involves  
keeping a distance from Allah!<sup>129</sup>

Warāqah bin Naufil reports that once ʿUmar r.a. donned a new garment  
and became the centre of attraction. At this, ʿUmar r.a. remarked:

It's nothing you see, its smile will not last.  
It's Allah that's permanent, wealth  
and children will perish.<sup>130</sup>

The third Khalīfah, ʿUthmān r.a., was sympathetic towards the art of  
poetic composition. He did not compose much poetry in his lifetime.  
However, when he did compose verses, he excelled. The topics he  
covered in poetry involved the more serious issues of life, for  
example, the purpose of existence. Preparation for the meeting with  
the Divine Being, in the eyes of ʿUthmān r.a., is the only real goal  
in life. All obstacles in this path should be destroyed at once.  
This attitude of ʿUthmān r.a. is clearly evident in the following  
two verses which he repeated frequently in his lifetime:

Destroyed will be sensual delight which obtains its essence  
from the forbidden, and misdeeds and disgrace remain.  
With it one only encounters evil consequences;  
there is no good in sensual delight, after it is the Fire.<sup>131</sup>

ʿAlī r.a. followed the example of the first three Caliphs and composed  
poetry. There is, in fact, an entire "dīwān" of poetry attributed  
to ʿAlī r.a.<sup>132</sup> Poetry, according to ʿAlī r.a., was a discerning  
balance.<sup>133</sup> A good training in the art of poetic composition not

only assisted in distinguishing the good and the bad, it also helped in achieving a sense of moderation.

Once 'Alī r.a., when he intended to make war, was inspired to say:

Which of my death days do I flee?  
A day not decreed, or a day decreed?  
A day not decreed I fear not,  
and caution cannot escape the decree.<sup>134</sup>

In the study of Islam's attitude towards poetry, a close look at the attitude of 'Ā'ishah r.a. in this regard, is of great significance. 'Ā'ishah r.a. was the beloved wife of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), and her involvement in poetry, in fact, reflects the attitude of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) to poetry. She was extremely attached to poetry. This is confirmed by Al-Miqdad bin Al-Aswad who states, "I did not know of any of the Companions of the Prophet s.a.w. knowing more poetry than 'Ā'ishah r.a., or being better than her (in poetry)."<sup>135</sup> She recited verses of Jāhilī poets and encouraged people to study poetry.<sup>136</sup> 'Ā'ishah r.a. once said, "Recite poetry to your children to sweeten their tongues."<sup>137</sup> According to 'Ā'ishah r.a. poetry is a medium that could be used for both positive and negative ends. Says 'Ā'ishah r.a.: "Poetry is a mode of expression. In it is the good and the ugly. Take the good in it and leave the ugly."<sup>138</sup>

'Ā'ishah r.a. often recited poetry and preferred certain poets over others. It is reported on the authority of Ibn Abu Mulīkah that 'Ā'ishah r.a. (once) said, "May Allah have mercy on Labīd who said:

Pierce the breast, fatherless, and go  
 follow with your noble kin the hidden.  
 Those who lived in their shelter left,  
 and I stayed behind like a scabby skin.

O, would he had lived till our time!" Ā'ishah r.a. then said, "I can recite a thousand of his verses. I recite (his verses) less than that of others."<sup>139</sup> Many other members of the family of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) took interest in, and recited poetry. Fāṭimah r.a., for example, is reported to have recited verses on the day her father (the Prophet p.b.u.h.) passed away. On another occasion, Fāṭimah's son, Al-Ḥusayn, also recited poetry after his brother Al-Ḥasan had censured him concerning his wife. Al-Ḥusayn remarked:

By your life, indeed I love the home  
 wherein is tranquility and the rebab.  
 I love them, and I will spend the greater portion of my wealth;  
 and the censurer will not be able to blame me.<sup>140</sup>

Mu'āwiyah, the successor of Ālī r.a., also took a keen interest in poetry. Like ʿUmar r.a., Mu'āwiyah considered Zuhayr to be "the most poetic of poets", because he got rid of the superfluity in panegyrics.<sup>141</sup> Once Ziyād sent his son to Mu'āwiyah who introduced him to arts of wisdom and found him aware of all things he asked for. Then he (Mu'āwiyah) recited poetry to him. At that, the son of Ziyād burst out saying, "I won't recite any of it." Then Mu'āwiyah wrote to Ziyād, explaining to him the virtues of poetry. Mu'āwiyah wrote:

What prevents you from reciting poetry? By Allah,  
 if one is hindered and he recites it, he becomes free.  
 If one is stingy and he recites it, he becomes  
 generous. If one is cowardly and he recites it, he  
 will (gain the courage to) fight.<sup>142</sup>

At times some of the Companions expressed doubts over the recitation of poetry. This attitude did not exist because of a poor knowledge about the place of poetry in Islam. The Companions feared that some of their bretheren may, at times, erroneously indulge in poetry that was condemned by the Qur'ān. Once 'Abd Allāh bin Zubayr was surprised to find a group of people reciting poetry in the courtyard of the Mosque; they argued that it was not the kind of poetry which was forbidden.<sup>143</sup>

A similar incident involved Moḥammad bin Sīrīn, who did not restrain himself in emphasising the lofty status of poetry in Islam. Once Moḥammad bin Sīrīn was asked in the Mosque whether it was permissible to recite poetry during the month of Ramaḍān (some people even went so far as to claim that the recitation of poetry nullified the "wuḍū"). He immediately recited a verse, and stood up straightaway to lead the prayer.<sup>144</sup>

A related incident is narrated by 'Amr bin Ubayd who reports that a man from Al-ʿUlūwiyyah came up to him and said, "Verily my heart yearns greatly for poetry." 'Amr replied, "What prevents you from that in which there is no harm?"<sup>145</sup>

The aforementioned discussions provide irrefutable evidence confirming that the Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) and his Companions consented to poetry, and were deeply affected by it. The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) used to favour certain poets, sanction their compositions, was sympathetic towards them, and was very apprehensive about them.

Poetry which amounted to a mere adornment of lies and straying from the right path, was forbidden. The old argument put forward by most Orientalists that the attitude of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) was an open condemnation of poets and poetry, is now inadmissible. On the contrary, the attitude and behaviour of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and his Companions in respect of poetry, was the single most contributory factor towards laying the fundamental principles of Arabic literary criticism and the preservation of classical Arabic poetry.

REFERENCE

1. See Al-Qur'ān IV.80.
2. Ibn Khaldūn: Ta'rīkh Ibn Khaldūn, Vol. I, p. 509.
3. U.A.H. Zayyāt: Ta'rīkh Adab 'Arabī (Urdu transl.), p. 177.
4. A.M.F. Karīm: Al-Ḥadīth of Mishkāt Al-Maṣabīḥ, Vol. II, p. 185.
5. R. Paret: "The Qur'ān", in A.F.L. Beeston (gen. ed.): Arabic literature to the end of the Umayyad period, p. 214.
6. Al-Ālūsī: Tafsīr Al-Ālūsī, Vol. XIX, p. 152.
7. M.G. Ḥaydar: "Islam and poetry", in Fikr wa Naẓr, Vol. XIX, p. 46.
8. M.J. Kister: "The Sīrah literature", in A.F.L. Beeston (gen. ed.): Arabic Literature to the end of the Umayyad period, p. 359.
9. See Al-A'ashā: Dīwān, pp. 218-219.
10. Ibn 'Abd Rabbiḥī: Al-ʿIqd Al-Farīd, Vol. I, p. 30.
11. I.H. Al-Asqalānī: Fath Al-Bārī, Vol. X, p. 446.
12. A. Farrūkh: Ta'rīkh Al-Adab Al-'Arabī, p. 258.
13. Al-Ālūsī: Rūḥ Al-Ma'ānī, Vol. XIX, p. 147.
14. J.D. Al-Suyūṭī: Al-Durr Al-Manthūr, Vol. V, p. 100.
15. Ibid.
16. M.G. Ḥaydar: "Islam and Poetry", in Fikr wa Naẓr, Vol. XIX, p. 45.
17. A. Wormhoudt: Introduction to the book of poetry (selected trans. of Ibn 'Abd Rabbiḥī's Al-ʿIqd Al-Farīd), p. 9.

18. Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī, Vol. VIII, p. 44. This recital by the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) was certainly not an exercise in self-praise. It intended to provide a sample of the type of poetry expected from Muslim poets.
19. Ibid., p. 43.
20. Al-Barqūqī: Sharḥ Dīwān Ḥassān bin Thābit, introd.
21. Imam Ghazzālī: Iḥyā'Ulūm Al-Dīn (Engl. transl.), p. 207.
22. A. Wormhoudt: Introduction to the book of poetry (trans. of the chapter "Rarities of the Poets" in Ibn Rabbīhi's Al-ʿIqd Al-Farīd), p. 17.
23. Al-Barqūqī: Sharḥ Dīwān Ḥassān bin Thābit, introd.
24. Ibn Qutaybah: Al-Shīr wa Al-Shuʿarā, p. 67 ff.
25. Cf. Ibn Khaldūn: Taʾrīkh Ibn Khaldūn, Vol. I, p. 509.
26. Al-Aghānī, Vol. XVI, pp. 147-151. See also Ibn Hishām: Sīrah Ibn Hishām, p. 889 ff.
27. Ibn Hishām: Sīrah Al-Nabī, Vol. IX, pp. 411-416.
28. Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Vol. IV, p. 1769.
29. Ibid.
30. J.D. Al-Suyūṭī: Al-Durr Al-Manthūr, Vol. V, p. 100.
31. A. Wormhoudt: Introduction to the book of poetry (trans. of the chapter "Rarities of the poets" in Ibn ʿAbd Rabbīhi's Al-ʿIqd Al-Farīd), p. 18.
32. Ibid, p. 19.
33. Al-Qurʾān XLVII. 30.
34. A. Wormhoudt: Introduction to the book of poetry and poets (Selected trans. of Abū Al-Ḥusayn Al-Kātib's 'Proofs in the paths of rhetoric'), p. 64.

35. T.A. Ibrāhīm: Ta'rīkh Al-naqd Al-adabi 'inda Al-'Arab, p. 32.
36. Ibn Rashīq: 'Umdah, Vol. I, p. 17.
37. Ibid.
38. Al-Barqūqī: Sharḥ Diwān Ḥassān bin Thābit, introd.
39. M.G. Ḥaydar: "Islam and poetry", in Fikr wa Naẓr, Vol. XIX, p. 41.
40. M.J. Kister: "The Sirah literature", in A.F.L. Beeston (gen. ed.): Arabic literature to the end of the Umayyad period, p. 359.
41. Ibn Rashīq: 'Umdah, Vol. I, pp. 27-32.
42. Ibn 'Abd Rabbihi: Al-'Iqd Al-Farīd, Vol. III, p. 147.
43. M.G. Ḥaydar: "Islam and poetry", in Fikr wa Naẓr, Vol. XIX, p. 47.
44. Ibn Rashīq: Al-'Umdah, Vol. I, p. 12.
45. Al-Zamaksharī: Al-Khashshāf 'an ḥaqā'iq ghawāmiḍ al-tanzīl, Vol. III, p. 345.
46. Al-Khāzin: Tafsīr Al-Khāzin, Vol. III, p. 374.
47. Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī, Vol. VIII, p. 42.
48. Al-Ālūsī: Tafsīr Al-Ālūsī, Vol. XIX, 148. Cf. also Al-Sūyūṭī: Al-Durr Al-Manthūr, Vol. V, p. 100.
49. Al-Barqūqī: Sharḥ Diwān Ḥassān bin Thābit, introd.
50. Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Vol. VIII, pp. 43-44.
51. Al-Ghazzālī: Iḥyā' Ulūm Al-Dīn (Engl. trans.), p. 207.
52. Al-Asqalānī: Fatḥ Al-Bārī, Vol. X, p. 447.



53. Al-Khāzin: Tafsīr Al-Khāzin, Vol. III, p. 374. Cf. also Al-Suyūṭī: Sharḥ Shawāhid Al-Mughannī, p. 114.
54. U. Farrūkh: Ta'rīkh Al-Adab Al-ʿArabī, p. 259.
55. Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Vol. IV, p. 1769. Cf. also Sunan Abū Dāwūd, Vol. III, p. 1393.
56. F. Karīm: Al-Ḥadīs of Mishkhāt Al-Maṣābīḥ, Vol. II, p. 190.
57. Cf. Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Vol. IV, p. 1769.
58. F. Karīm: Al-Ḥadīs of Mishkhāt Al-Maṣābīḥ, Vol. II, p. 187.
59. Ibn Kathīr: Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr, Vol. II, p. 664.
60. Al-Barqūqī: Sharḥ Dīwān Ḥassān bin Thābit, introd.
61. F. Karīm: Al-Ḥadīs of Mishkhāt, Vol. II, p. 191.
62. I.S. Aʿwān: ʿArabī naʿt kā dawr-e-awwal, pp. 45-46.
63. Ibn Hishām: Al-Sīrah Al-Nabawīyyah, Vol. II, pp. 8-46, 129-183, 254-276.
64. M.A.M. Khan: "Life of the Prophet at Mecca as reflected in contemporary poetry", in Islamic Culture, Apr. 1968, p. 82.
65. Ibid.
66. Al-Zamaksharī: Al-Kashshāf, Vol. III, p. 133.
67. Ibn ʿArabī: Tafsīr Al-Qurʾān Al-Karīm, Vol. II, p. 189.
68. Al-Suyūṭī: Al-Durr Al-Manthūr, Vol. V, p. 101.
69. Ibid., p. 100.
70. Ibid., p. 101. Cf. also Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī, Vol. VIII, p. 44.
71. Al-Bīqāʿī: Naẓm Al-Durar, Vol. XIV, p. 118.

72. Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī, Vol. VIII, p. 44.
73. Al-Ālūsī: Rūḥ Al-Maʿānī, Vol. XIX, p. 148.
74. M.J. Maghniyyah: Al-Tafsīr Al-Kāshif, Vol. V, p. 525.
75. Al-Zamaksharī: Al-Kashshāf, Vol. III, p. 345.
76. Sira ʿalā hamish rauḍ al-unf, Vol. II, p. 113.
77. Dīwān Ḥassān bin Thābit, p. 3.
78. T.A. Ibrāhīm: Taʾrīkh Al-Naqd Al-Adabī ʿinda Al-ʿArab, p. 31.
79. Al-Suyūṭī: Al-Durr Al-Manthūr, Vol. V, p. 101.
80. Al-Ālūsī: Rūḥ Al-Maʿānī, Vol. XIX, p. 147.
81. A. Farrūkh: Taʾrīkh Al-Adab Al-ʿArabī, p. 258.
82. T.A. Ibrāhīm: Taʾrīkh Al-Naqd Al-Adabī ʿinda Al-ʿArab, p. 31.
83. Al-Ālūsī: Rūḥ Al-Maʿānī, Vol. XIX, p. 148. Cf. also Al-Durr Al-Manthūr, Vol. V, p. 100.
84. M.G. Ḥaydar: "Islam and Poetry", in Fikr wa Naẓr, Vol. XIX, p. 47.
85. Al-Ṭabarī: Taʾrīkh Al-Ṭabarī, Vol. I, p. 3245.
86. C. Brockleman: Taʾrīkh Al-Adab Al-ʿArabī, p. 153.
87. A. Farrūkh: Taʾrīkh Al-Adab Al-ʿArabī, p. 257.
88. V. Cantarino: Arabic poetics in the Golden Age, pp. 146-147.
89. Al-Barqūqī: Sharḥ Dīwān Ḥassān bin Thābit, introd.
90. Al-Ālūsī: Rūḥ Al-Maʿānī, Vol. XIX, p. 147.
91. Al-Zamaksharī: Al-Kashshāf, Vol. III, p. 133.

92. M. Majāzī: Al-Tafsīr Al-Wāḍiḥ, Vol. II, p. 78.
93. A. Farrūkh: Ta'rīkh Al-Adab Al-'Arabī, p. 256.
94. I.S. A'wān: 'Arabī na't kā dawr-e-awwal, p. 256.
95. Al-Qur'ān IV. 148.
96. Al-Qur'ān II. 194.
97. A. Farrūkh: Ta'rīkh Al-Adab Al-'Arabī, pp. 258. Cf. also U.A.H. Zayyāt: Ta'rikhe Adabe 'Arabī (Urdu trans.), p. 177.
98. I.S. A'wān: 'Arabī na't kā dawr-e-awwal, pp. 44-45.
99. A.R. Al-Ra'fat: Shi'r Al-Dāwah Al-Islāmiyyah, p. 8.
100. Al-Khāzin: Tafsīr Al-Khāzin, Vol. III, p. 374.
101. M.G. Ḥaydar: "Islam and poetry" in Fikr wa Naẓr, Vol. XIX, p. 46.
102. A. Farrūkh: Ta'rīkh Al-Adab Al-'Arabī, p. 259.
103. A.S. A'wān: 'Arabī na't kā dawr-e-awwal, p. 53.
104. Sharḥ Dīwān Labīd, pp. 4 ff.
105. Ibid., p. 180.
106. C.J. Lyall: Translations of ancient Arabic poetry, p. 90.
107. Fath Al-Bārī, Vol. X, p. 446.
108. Al-Khāzin: Tafsīr Al-Khāzin, Vol. III, p. 374.
109. S.M. Aḥmed: Ta'rikh-e-Islam, p. 156.
110. Al-Barqūqī: Sharḥ Dīwān Ḥassān bin Thābit, introd.
111. Ibid.

112. Al-Ālūsī: Rūḥ Al-Maʿānī, Vol. XIX, p. 148. Cf. also Al-Bīqāʿī: Naẓm Al-Durar, Vol. XIV, p. 115.
113. T.A. Ibrāhīm: Taʾrīkh Al-Naqd Al-Adabī ʿinda Al-ʿArab, p. 34.
114. V. Cantarino: Arabic poetics in the Golden Age, p. 147.
115. M.M. Badawī: "From primary to secondary 'Qaṣīdas'", in Journal of Arabic Literature, Vol. XI, p. 5.
116. M.G. Ḥaydar: "Islam and Poetry", in Fikr wa Naẓr, Vol. XIX, p. 41.
117. Al-Khāzin: Tafsīr Al-Khāzin, Vol. III, p. 373.
118. Al-Jāḥiẓ: Al-Maḥasin wa Al-Aḍḍad Al-Mansūb, p. 292.
119. Kitāb Al-Aghānī, Vol. XX, pp. 4-5.
120. The author of "Tafsīr Al-Qurṭubī" reports that ʿUmar r.a. in fact had him dismissed.
121. Ibn Kathīr: Tafsīr Al-Qurʾān Al-Aẓīm, Vol. III, p. 353.
122. Al-Barqūqī: Sharḥ Dīwān Ḥassān bin Thābit, introd.
123. Sunan Abū Dāwūd (Engl. trans.), Vol. III, p. 1394.
124. A. Wormhoudt: Introduction to the book of poetry (selected trans. of the chapter, "On the excellence of poetry" in Ibn Rabbihī's Al-ʿIqd Al-Farīd), p. 15.
125. T.A. Ibrāhīm: Taʾrīkh Al-Naqd Al-Adabī ʿinda Al-ʿArab, p. 34.
126. A. Wormhoudt: Introduction to the book of poetry (selected trans. of the chapter, "On the excellence of poetry" in Ibn ʿAbd Rabbihī's Al-ʿIqd Al-Farīd), p. 8.
127. A.H. Al-Ḥāmid: Shīʿr Al-Daʿwah Al-Islāmiyyah, p. 264.
128. Al-Ālūsī: Rūḥ Al-Maʿānī, Vol. XIX, p. 148.
129. Ibid., p. 149.

130. Ibid.
131. Murūj Al-Zahab, Vol. I, p. 443.
132. M.G. Haydar: "Islam and poetry", in Fikr wa Nazr, Vol. XIX, p. 47.
133. Al-Ālūsī: Rūḥ Al-Ma'ānī, Vol. XIX, p. 151.
134. A. Wormhoudt: Introduction to the book of poetry (selected trans. of the chapter, "On the excellence of poetry" in Ibn 'Abd Rabbihi's Al-ʿIqd Al-Farīd), p. 16.
135. Ibid.
136. M.J. Kister: "The Sīrah literature", in A.F.L. Beeston (ed.): Arabic literature to the end of the Umayyad period, p. 360.
137. A. Wormhoudt: Introduction to the book of poetry (selected trans. of the chapter, "On the virtues of poetry" in Ibn 'Abd Rabbihi's Al-ʿIqd Al-Farīd), p. 15.
138. Ibn Rashīq: ʿUmdah, Vol. I, pp. 27-32.
139. A. Wormhoudt: Introduction to the book of poetry, p. 16.
140. Al-Ālūsī: Rūḥ Al-Ma'ānī, Vol. XIX, p. 149.
141. T.A. Ibrāhīm: Ta'rīkh Al-Naqd Al-Adabī 'inda Al-ʿArab, p. 38.
142. A. Wormhoudt: Introduction to the book of poetry, p. 15.
143. M.J. Kister: "The Sīrah literature", in A.F.L. Beeston (ed.): Arabic literature to the end of the Umayyad period, p. 360.
144. Ibid.
145. Al-Zamaksharī: Al-Kashshāf, Vol. III, p. 133.

### CONCLUSIONS

A central problem in the study of Arabic literary culture is an approach which relies heavily on non-Arabic standards of criticism. The results of such endeavours can only be negative. This weakness is unfortunately evident in many Western scholars who have devoted themselves to the study of Arabic literature. Thus their studies often ended as an enumeration of departures from, and misunderstandings of, the spirit of Arabic poetry.

The revelation of the Qur'ān laid down the first principles of literary criticism. Right from the first century A.H. the concept of poetry - a lie or a truth - received the attention of scholars. Zuhayr and Salāmā, for example, were admired for their realism in poetry. In an attempt to solve the dispute, literary critics proposed two contradictory statements: one defending poetic sincerity and truthfulness; the other emphasising the poet's freedom from objective truth. Generally the poetic lie no longer had moral implications.

A strange feature of the writings of Western scholars is the supreme status accorded to Jāhilī poetry. The picture painted is one of poetry **par excellence**. The fundamental weaknesses of Jāhilī poetry are either deliberately or accidentally ignored. The poetic licence enabled the pre-Islamic Arab to recite verses that were blind to morality. Pre-Islamic poetry was largely sensual, immoral and

atheistic. The high degree of perfection reached in structure and style was lost in **ma'nā** .

Pre-Islamic poetry was based on a way of life which had serious weaknesses. The Arabs were confused in their concept of God: the majority of them turned to idol worship. The social life of these Arabs compared with the worst in other parts of the world. Excessive drinking, adultery, and engaging in battles had become an accepted way of life. These basic weaknesses were reflected in their verses, reducing it to a body of poetry that was largely vile and polytheistic.

One question that always remained a source of much debate concerned the style of the Qur'ān: was it prosaic or poetic? As early as the 1st century A.H. the **mushrikīn** alleged that the Qur'ān was a type of poetry, and that its **i'jāz** was due to the fact that it was poetic. The misconception (or fraudulent accusation) was cleared by the Qur'ān itself which defended its divine purity and the mission of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.). The Qur'ān, though it displays some prosaic and poetic tendencies, is neither prose nor poetry. Its style is unique ("**i'jāz**"). A central issue that confronted scholars was whether the style of the Qur'ān was inimitable or not. The majority of the critics confirmed the **i'jāz** of the Qur'ān and the futility of comparing the divine style with a human one.

The place of poetry in Islam was always a topic of much heated discussion through the centuries. Scholars always remained divided over the scope of the designation, "Islamic poetry". Some individuals had even concluded that poetry had no place in Islam. This confusion was due to a poor understanding of:

- 1) the meaning of verses 221-227 of Chapter XXVI - which provide the most detailed Qur'ānic account of poets and poetry - and the circumstances surrounding their revelation;
- 2) the implications of the exceptive verse (v. 227) of Al-Shu'arā and the circumstances surrounding its revelation;
- 3) the general attitude of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and his Companions towards poetry, and the factors that were responsible for the shaping of this attitude.

The Qur'ānic (and indeed the general Islamic) attitude towards poetry was two fold: poetry that was conducive to good was accepted and encouraged; poetry that was conducive to evil was simply forbidden. The Qur'ān reminds us that the poets were the founders of an ideology that was based on superstition and evil, and that they were constantly engaged in changing the face of reality. This poetry had no place in Islam. On what grounds then do the poets justify their presence in Islamic literary culture? The mandate is given by the Qur'ān itself.



Verse 227 of Al-Shu'arā lifted the sanction from Muslim poets. The art of poetic composition was now not only permissible, but it could - subject to certain conditions - very easily be accepted as 'ibādāt .

The attitude of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) towards poetry was simply an endorsement of the Qur'ānic one. It revolved around the idea of **amr bi al-ma'rūf wa nahy 'an al-munkar** , inviting towards good and forbidding that which is detestable. The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) certainly acknowledged the place of poetry in Islam, but he insisted on changing the status and function of poetry. In the early Islamic period the unrestricted licence accorded to poets in matters of content were withdrawn. Poetry now became subservient to the major objectives of the Islamic movement; it became a medium for inviting towards the truth of Islam and defending it against the satires of the **mushrikīn** .

The positive attitude of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) towards poetry is illustrated in the following facts:

- 1) The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) enquired about the definition of poetry.
- 2) He often recited verses - individually, and at times with his Companions - of Muslim and non-Muslim poets.

- 3) The Messenger of Allah (p.b.u.h.) frequently listened directly to poetic recitals by the poets themselves.
- 4) On numerous occasions he requested his Companions to recite verses.
- 5) It was his habit to comment on poetic compositions: appreciating good poetry and discouraging the recital of verses that were undesirable.
- 6) The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) acknowledged the element of wisdom in poetry and the great role it could play in inviting towards Islam and defending it.
- 7) He promised a beautiful reward for those poets serving the cause of Islam.

The aforementioned are merely a selection of facts confirming the positive attitude of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) towards poetry. In short, the Prophet's involvement with poetry was an almost complete involvement: he engaged in almost every aspect of it, minus composing his own verses.

The Prophet's criticism of poetry ranged from mild discouragement to issuing the death sentence on rare occasions. This attitude was determined by the relevant circumstances. The Prophet (p.b.u.h.), for example, simply discouraged young girls from praising him too much; on another occasion he issued the death sentence on Abū Qutaylah for his excessive nuisance against him.

The favourable attitude of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and his Companions to poetic compositions is evident in the fact that the early Muslims were the "custodians" of the old Arabic poetry. The greatest impetus in this direction was provided by the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) who gave the licence for the transmission of Jāhilī poetry. The need to elucidate rare words and formulations in the Qur'ān inspired the early Muslims to seek the aid of the old Arabic poetry. In spite of the fact that Jāhilī poetry had fundamental weaknesses, it continued to occupy a place in early Muslim life, serving an important function in the interpretation of the Qur'ān and the development of the Arabic literary language.

The relationship between Islam and poetry has always been a cordial one through the centuries: never at any stage was there a cessation in the art of poetic composition. However, this beautiful image is frequently distorted by many Orientalistic scholars who are unanimous in their conclusion that the Qur'ān (and Islam in general) has condemned poets and poetry. This view is not only surprising, but inconceivable in

view of the fact that it arises from a group of scholars who have not only mastered the Arabic language, but are well acquainted with classical Arabic texts. The evidence against this Orientalistic viewpoint is overwhelming, to mention, the least. To these scholars we can only quote the following Qur'ānic verse:

صم بكم عمي فهم لا يرجعون

Deaf, dumb and blind; they will never come back!

(Al-Qur'ān II.18)

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- AL -A<sup>ʿ</sup>SHĀ: Dīwān, ed. R. Geyer. London, 1928.
- A<sup>ʿ</sup>WĀN, I.S.: "'Arabī na<sup>ʿ</sup>t kā dawr-e-awwal", in Fikr wa Nazr, XVII, 1980.
- AL-A<sup>ʿ</sup>ZAMĪ, S.: "Ḥassān bin Thābit Al-Anṣārī wa shi<sup>ʿ</sup>ruhu Al-Jāhili", in Al-Ba<sup>ʿ</sup>th Al-Islāmī, XXIX, 1985.
- ʿALĪ: The Holy Qur'<sup>ʾ</sup>ān. English translation and commentary edited by ʿAbdullāh Yūsuf ʿAlī. Qaṭar, Presidency of Islamic Courts and Affairs, 1946.
- AL-ĀLŪSĪ, M.: Rūḥ al-ma<sup>ʿ</sup>ānī fī tafsīr Al-Qur'<sup>ʾ</sup>ān Al-ʿAzīm, XIX. Beirut, Idārah Al-Ṭibā<sup>ʿ</sup>ah Al-Munīriyyah, n.d.
- ABŪ AL-ANWAR: Al-Shi<sup>ʿ</sup>r Al-Jāhili. Cairo, Maktabah Al-Shāb, 1976.
- IBN AL-ʿARABĪ, A.B.: Aḥkām Al-Qur'<sup>ʾ</sup>ān, III. Cairo, Maṭba<sup>ʿ</sup>ah ʿIsā Al-Ḥalābī, n.d.  
Tafsīr Al-Qur'<sup>ʾ</sup>ān Al-Karīm, II. Beirut, Dār Al-Andalus, 1981.
- ʿARAFĀT, W.N.: Dīwān of Ḥassān bin Thābit, I. London, Luzac, 1971.
- ARBERRY, A.J.: Arabic poetry. London, Cambridge University Press, 1965.
- AL-ASQALĀNĪ, I.H.: Fath Al-Bārī, X. Beirut, Dār Al-Ma<sup>ʿ</sup>rifah, n.d.
- BADAWĪ, M.M.: "From primary to secondary 'qaṣīdas'", in Journal of Arabic Literature, XI, 1980.
- AL-BĀQILLĀNĪ: I<sup>ʿ</sup>jāz Al-Qur'<sup>ʾ</sup>ān, ed. Aḥmad Al-Ṣaqr. Cairo, Dār Al-Ma<sup>ʿ</sup>ārif, 1963.
- AL-BARQŪQĪ: Sharḥ Dīwān Ḥassān bin Thābit. Cairo, Al-Maktabah Al-Tijāriyyah Al-Kubrā, 1347 A.H.

AL-BAYDĀWĪ, N.A.A.K.A.: Anwār al-tanzīl wa asrār al-ta'wīl, II. Cairo, Muṣṭafā Al-Bābī Al-Ḥalabī, 1939.

BEARDSLEY, M.C.: Aesthetics, New York, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1958.

BEESTON, A.F.L. (gen. ed.): Arabic literature to the end of the Umayyad period. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

BELL, R.: Introduction to the Qur'ān. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1970.

BERENSON, B.: Aesthetics and History. London, Constable Publishers, 1955.

AL-BĪQĀ'Ī, B.A.H.: Naẓm al-durar fī tanāsub al-ayāt wa al-suwar, XIV. Hyderabad, Dā'irah Al-Ma'ārif Al-'Uthmāniyyah, 1979.

BROCKLEMAN, C.: Ta'rīkh Al-Adab Al-'Arabī. Cairo, Dār Al-Ma'ārif, 1977.

AL-BUKHĀRĪ, M.B.I.: Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī, VIII. Beirut, Dār Iḥyā Al-Turāth Al-'Arabī, n.d.

CACHIA, P.: Tāhā Ḥusayn. London, Luz., 1956.

CANTARINO, V.: Arabic poetics in the Golden Age. The Netherlands, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1975.

CARRITT, E.F. (gen. ed.): Philosophies of beauty. London, Oxford University Press, 1931.

CRAGG, K.: The event of the Qur'ān. London, George Allen, 1971.

DARWĪSH, M.T.: Al-Naqd Al-Adabi 'inda Al-'Arab. Cairo, Dar Al-Ma'ārif, 1979.

ABŪ DĀWŪD: Sunan Abū Dāwūd, III. Lahore, Sh. Muḥammad Ashraf, 1984.

The Encyclopaedia of Islam, new ed. London, Luzac, 1960.

- FARIQ, K.A.: History of Arabic literature. Delhi, Vikas, 1972.  
"Pre-Islamic Arabic poetry and poets", in Studies in Islam,  
IV, 1967.
- FARRŪKH, A.: Ta'rīkh Al-Adab Al-'Arābī. Beirut, Dār Al-Ma'rifah,  
n.d.
- GABRIELI, F.: Arabic poetry. Los Angeles, 1971.
- AL-GHARNAṬĪ, M.B.Y.: Al-Baḥr Al-Muḥīṭ, VII. Cairo, Maṭba'ah  
Al-Sa'adah, 1328 A.H.
- GIBB, H.A.R.: Arabic literature. London, Oxford University Press,  
1962.
- GOLDZIER, I.: A short history of classical Arabic literature.  
Berlin, Georg Olms, 1966.
- GRUNEBAUM, G.E. von: Arabic poetry. Wiesbaden, Otto Harrassowitz,  
1973.
- IBN ḤABĪB: Al-Muḥabbar. Hyderabad, Dā'irah Al-Ma'ārif Al-'Uthmaniyyah,  
1361, A.H.
- AL-ḤĀKIM AL-NAY-SABŪRĪ: Kitāb ma'rifat 'ulūm Al-Ḥadīth. Hyderabad,  
Dā'irah Al-Ma'ārif Al-'Uthmāniyyah, 1935.
- HAMORI, A.: On the art of medieval Arabic literature. Princeton,  
Princeton University Press, 1974.
- HARRELL, J.: History of aesthetics, I-III. The Hague, Mouton, 1970.
- ABU ḤAYĀN: Al-Baḥr Al-Muḥīṭ fī tafsīr Al-Qur'ān, VII. Cairo,  
Dār Al-Ma'ārif, 1328 A.H.
- ḤAYDAR, M.G.: "Islam and poetry", in Fikr wa Naẓr, XIX, 1981.
- IBN HISHĀM: Al-Sīrah Al-Nabawiyyah, I, II. Cairo, Muṣṭafā Al-Bābī  
Al-Ḥalabī, 1955.

HOSPERS, J.: Introductory readings in aesthetics. London, Collier Macmillan, 1969.

HUSAYN, T.: Fī Al-Adab Al-Jāhili. Cairo, Dār Al-Ma'ārif, 1958.  
Fuṣul fī Al-Adab wa Al-Naqd. Cairo, Dār Al-Ma'ārif, 1945.

IBRĀHĪM, T.A.: Ta'rīkh al-naqd al-adabi 'inda Al-'Arab. Damascus, Dār Al-Ḥikmah, 1972.

INDEX ISLAMICUS, 1st ed. London, Mansell.

AL-IṢFAHĀNĪ: Kitāb Al-Aghānī. Cairo, Dār Al-Ma'ārif, n.d.

IBN IṢHĀQ: Sīrah, ed. H. Wustenfeld. Gottingen, 1858.

JUM'AH, M.J.: Al-Adab Al-'Arabī wa ta'rīkhuh fī 'aṣray ṣadr Al-Islām wa al-dawlah Al-Umawīyyah. Riyadh, Al-Idārah Al-'Āmmah li Al-Ma'āhid, 1377 A.H.

AL-JUMAHĪ: Ṭabaqāt fuḥūl al-shu'arā, ed. A.M. Shākir. Cairo, Dar Al-Ma'ārif, 1952.

AL-JURJĀNĪ: Asrār al-balāghah. Istanbul, Government Press, 1954.

KAHLE, P.E.: "The Qur'ān and the 'Arabiyya", in Ignace Goldziher Memorial, I, 1948.

KANAZĪ, G.: "Abu Hilal Al-'Askari's attitude towards poetry and poets", in Journal of Semitic Studies, XX, 1975.

KARĪM, F.: Al-Ḥadīs (of Mishkhāt Al-Maṣābiḥ), II. Dacca, A. Khatun, 1963.  
Imam Ghazzālī's Iḥyā 'Ulūm Al-Dīn. I, II. Lahore, Sind Sagar Academy, n.d.

IBN KATHĪR: Al-Sīrah Al-Nabawīyyah, I-IV. Cairo, Maṭba'ah 'Isā Al-Ḥalabī, 1964.  
Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr, II. Mecca, Dār Al-Qur'ān Al-Karīm, 1393 A.H.

Tafsīr Al-Qur'ān Al-'Aẓīm, III, Beirut, Dār Al-Fikr Al-'Arabī, n.d.





- IBN KHALDŪN, A.R.M.: Muqaddimah, ed. F. Rosenthal. London, 1958.  
Muqaddimah Ibn Khaldūn, II. Karachi, Nafīs Academy, 1977.  
Ta'rikh Ibn Khaldūn, I. Beirut, Mu'assasah Al-A'lamī li  
 Al-Maṭbu'āt, 1971.
- IBN KHALLIKĀN: Wafāyāt Al-A'yān, I-VI, Cairo, Maktabah Al-Nahḍah  
 Al-Miṣriyyah, 1948.
- KHAN, M.A.M.: "Life of the Prophet at Mecca as reflected in contemp-  
 orary poetry", in Islamic Culture, XLII, 1968.
- KHAN, M.M.: The translation of the meanings of "Saḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī",  
 VIII. Lahore, Kazi Publications, 1979.
- AL-KHĀZIN, A.M.I.: Tafsīr Al-Khāzin, III. Beirut, Moḥammad Amin  
 Damj, n.d.
- KINANY, A.K.: The development of 'Gazal' in Arabic Literature.  
 Damascus, Syrian University, 1950.
- LYALL, C.J.: Translations of ancient Arabic poetry. Edinburgh,  
 Williams and Norgate, 1885.
- MAGHNIYYAH, M.J.: Al-Tafsīr Al-Kāshif, V. Beirut, Dār Al-Jawād, 1981.
- MAJĀZĪ, M.: Al-Tafsīr Al-Wāḍiḥ, II. Cairo, Dār Al-Tafsīr, n.d.
- MAKDĪSĪ, G. (gen. ed.): Arabic and Islamic studies in honor of  
 Hamilton A.R. Gibb. The Netherlands, Leiden, 1969.
- AL-MASLŪT, A.H.: Ta'rikh Al-Adab Al-'Arabī. Tripoli, University  
 of Libya, 1976.
- NAHM, M.C.: Readings in philosophy of art and aesthetics. New Jersey,  
 Prentice-Hall, 1975.
- AL-NAWAWĪ, A.A.: Tafsīr Al-Nawawī, I-II. Cairo, Dār Iḥyā Al-Kutub  
 Al-'Arabīyyah, n.d.

AL-NAYSĀBŪRĪ, M.B.H.: Saḥīḥ Muslim, IV. Beirut, Dār Iḥyā Al-Turāth Al-‘Arabī, 1976.

NICHOLSON, R.A.: Studies in Islamic poetry. London, Cambridge University Press, 1969.

IBN QUTAYBAH: Kitāb al-shīr wa al-shu‘arā, ed. M.M. Shākir. Cairo Dar Al-Ma‘ārif, 1366 A.H.

QUṬUB, S.: Fī zilāl Al-Qur’ān, V. Beirut, Dār Al-Shurūq, 1977.

RA’FAT, A.H.: Shi‘r Al-Da‘wah Al-Islāmiyyah. Riyadh, Institute of Arabic Language, 1971.

IBN ‘ABD RABBIHĪ: Al-‘Iqd Al-Farīd, I-VII. Cairo, Maṭba‘ah Lajnah Al-Ta’līf, 1948.

IBN RASHĪQ, A.H.: Al-‘Umdah fī mahāsin al-shīr wa ādābih wa naqdih. I. Cairo, Dār Al-Ma‘ārif, 1955.

RAUF, M.A.: "A Muslim response to 'The pre-Islamic period of sirat Al-Nabī'", in The Muslim World, LXII, 1972.

SALLĀM, M.Z.: Athar Al-Qur’ān fi taṭawwur Al-Naqd Al-‘Arabī. Cairo, Dār Al-Ma‘ārif, 1952.

SANTAYANA, G.: The sense of beauty being the outline of aesthetic theory. New York, Collier, 1961.

SHĀHID, I.: "Another contribution to Korānic exegesis: The 'Sūrah' of the Poets", in Journal of Arabic Literature, XXVI, 1983.

AL-SUYŪṬĪ, J.D.: Al-Durr Al-Manthūr, V. Beirut, Moḥammad Amīn Damj, n.d.  
Al-Muḥḥir fī ‘ulūm al-lughah wa anwā‘ihā, ed. M.A.J. Al-Mawlā. Cairo, Dar Al-Ma‘ārif, n.d.

WATT, W.M.: "Pre-Islamic Arabian religion in the Qur’ān", in Islamic Studies, XX, 1976.

WORMHOUDT, A.: Introduction to the book of poetry and poets.  
William Penn College, 1973.

AL-ZAMAKSHARĪ, M.I.U.: Al-Kashshāf, III. Teheran, Intishārāt Aftāb,  
n.d.  
Al-Kashshāf ‘an haqā’iq ghawāmiḍ al-tanzīl, III. Beirut,  
Dār Al-Kitāb Al-‘Arabī, n.d.

AL-ZAYYĀT, A.H.: Ta’rīkh Al-Adab Al-‘Arabī. Cairo, Dār Al-Ma‘ārif,  
1914.

ZIYĀRAT, A.H.: Ta’rīkh Adabe ‘Arabī. Lahore, Sh. Ghulām ‘Alī, 1961.