

Early Arabic Literary Criticism

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Abstract

This paper is designed to give a brief survey of the origin and development of Arabic literary criticism right from the Pre-Islamic age down to the end of the Umayyad era. It surveys different trends that were published under review.

The Arabs were less critic. This maxim holds true in respect of their history, biography, human behaviour and social conditions. But other than these, they were more inclined towards criticism than any other nation. So far as the craftsmanship of literature is concerned, they began criticism of poetry, prose and history successively (Zaydan 1967: 1, 551). In the present paper an attempt has been made to give a brief survey of the origin and development of Arabic literary criticism right from the Jahiliyyah or Pre-Islamic age (which covers more than a century from about 500 A.D) to the end of the Umayyad period (661-750 A.D)

ARABIC LITERARY CRITICISM

Arabic literary criticism¹ has a long history and it seems to go back as far as the beginning of Arabic literature itself. Literary criticism was extant in Arabic during the *Jahiliyyah* or Pre-Islamic age, though it was simple and bland, which suited Arabic poetry. The poetry of Pre-Islamic age was nothing but an expression of immediate feeling and criticism, too so based on the excitability and sensitivity (*Ibrahim 1937: 24*).

There were two trends in the criticism of the Pre-Islamic age. One is to pass a judgment on a poem. Here in a critic gives attention to the form,

theme and structure of the poem. The other is to pass judgment on poets, compare them and prefer one to other on the basis of their merits and demerits and entitle some of their odes (*Qasidah*) through comparism (Yusuf 1987: 46).

The ancient historians of Arabic literature referred to the observations made by literary critics, specially in the Annual Tournaments at 'Ukaz Fair near Taif and other Seasonal Assemblies or markets (*Arwaq*), literary Sittings—special and general—in the courts of the Arab Kings of Hira and Ghassan and elsewhere. In those places the poet used to gather to present their poems and the judges or critics used to choose the best poem or poems in accordance with certain principles. There is a legend that each of the poems awarded annual prize at the 'Ukaz Fair was inscribed in golden letters and having against the walls of the Ka'bah (Hitti 1953:93). Hence they are called Mu'allaqat or suspended poems. Of course, this legend is vehemently denied by the modern scholars.

These literary competitions where poets vied with one another in composing poems and their appreciation therein, motivated them to make their words and contents stable resulting in the advancement of literary criticism. The Quraish had an important role to play in the progress of criticism. The poems accepted or rejected by them were the accepted and rejected respectively by other tribes, as they (Quraish) occupied very high position as critic. They had the privilege to choose the best words and styles compatible to what they had at their disposal and hence their language became more acceptable to people than that of other tribes. So, the poets in general composed their poems in the language of the Quraish (Amin 1967:348).

There are numerous instances in the historical and biographical sketches of Pre-Islamic poets whose verses have been openly criticized for one reason or the other. In the 'Ukaz Fair a red tent of skin was put up for the poet al-Nabigah al-Dhubyani (died about 604 A.D) and the poets would go there and present their poems before him for appreciation. Once al-A'sha Abu Basir recited his poem followed by Hassan b. Thabit, then all other poets did the same in their turn. Lastly, al-Khansa al-Sulmyyah presented herself there and recited her poem. Al-Nabigah said, "By Allah, had Abu Basir not recited to me a bit earlier, I would

certainly remark that you (al-Khansa) are the greatest of all poets of geni and man (*Ibn Qutaybah 1966: 344*).

It is well known that Innu'ul-Qays and 'Alqama vied with each other in extempore versification. Once Innu'ul-Qays recited the following couplet:

فللوط الهوب وللساق درة . وللزجر منه وقع اخرج مذهب

[(The horse is so swift when it runs) the whip blazes and the shanks remain momentum, and the rebuke is very effective for him. The horse is coloured with black and white and well disciplined.]

And 'Alqama recited:

فادركهن ثانيا من عنانه . يمر كمر الراح المتحلب

[(The horse is so swift that) it attained them (caravan) while it was folding with bridle and it passes like an evening cloud which sheds rain.]

The couplets were referred to the wife of Innu'ul-Qays for her opinion. She gave her verdict in favour of 'Alqama on the ground that the qualities of the horse, described by Innu'ul-Qays, were inferior to those described by 'Alqama, although both poets were equally efficient in diction, expression and style (*Tabana 1975: 54*).

Innu'ul-Qays was considered as the originator of a style of Qasidah (ode) and was praised for his command over unique descriptions, original similes and metaphors (*Ibn Sallam 1947: 27*). Similarly he was praised for his following elegant and charming verses (*Ibn Qutaybah 1966: 114*).

وما نرفت عينك الا لتضربي . بسيميك في اعشار قلب مقتل

[And your (poet's beloved) eyes did not shed tears but only to attack my pierced heart with your two arrows (eyes)].

In the like manner, he was severely criticized for the verse such as:

فتوضع فالمقراة لم يعف رسمها ... وهل من رسم دارش من معول

[Then Tawdah and Miqrata (two places) whose signs have not been obliterated..., And is there any relying on obliterated signs...?] since the second verse contradicts the first. And in the couplet:

إذا ما الشرياني السماء تعرضت . تعرض اثناء الوشاح اليفصل

[(He went to her) when the Pleiades came across the sky like a Woman's belt studded with gems].

Innu'ul-Qays was criticized for the reason that it is the Gemini and not the Pleiades that comes across the sky after midnight.

The above mentioned critical observations indicate that not only diction and style were taken into account but also the poets realism and correct knowledge of the subject were considered in passing judgment on his verse (*Khan 1962-63: 61*).

Though most of the critical narratives of the pre-Islamic age are not authentic but all of their foundations are genuine which denotes the primary taste of criticism of the period. It is natural that the literary criticism followed this way in the first stage. Criticism followed the poetry as the first poet was followed by the first critic. Arabic poetry in pre-Islamic age, in nutshell, was more attribute to perceptibility and to exuberance of feeling than with prudence and thought. The poet composed poems, under controlled exuberance of his thought, and the critic was also guided by his perceptibility (*Amin 1967: 385*).

That was the reason that criticism was neither based on the artistic principles nor was it based on coordinated and matured taste. It was partial and natural, accruing from excitement of feeling and natural taste. This simple type of criticism remained in its primary stage for a long time in the Islamic period till it was founded on the established principles based on the scientific analysis. (*Ibid: 385*).

The second phase in Arabic literary criticism started with the advent of Islam and the revelation of the Holy Quran which was completely different from all existing forms of literature as it was neither poetry nor pure prose. The Holy Quran was destined to play an important role in the life of the Arabic language and literature and consequently in the enrichment of Arabic literary criticism (*Bakalla 1984: 260*).

The Prophet Muhammad (SM) was better than any one who paid attention to literary criticism and his was the new method compatible with the spirit of Islam and also with its teaching. His opinions about

poetry and the poets and practice with poetry and its criticism that has come down to us bears its testimony.² Reality and truth were the two criteria adopted by him in evaluating poetry and giving judgment on it. This was the method of criticism of followed by his four Caliphs as well as his other companions (*Yusuf, Ibid: 54-55*).

During the time of the pious Caliphs literary assemblies (*Majalis al-Adab*) were held in the mosques where poems were recited and evaluated. Besides the poets, the Caliphs and other literature loving people participated in these literary circles where discussions about the *Jahili* and *Mokhadram* poets also took place. Majlis (assembly) of Hassan b. Thabit is one of the famous examples of these assemblies. 'Abd Allah b. 'Abbas, a companion of the Prophet Muhammad (SM) was a distinguished literary personality and critic of that time (*Ibid: 61*).

The second Caliph 'Umar (R) was known for his appreciation and sound judgment of ancient and contemporary Arabic poetry. Once he made the following remark about the famous Pre-Islamic poet Zuhayr b. Abi Sulma (*Ibn Rashique 1972: 1, 81*):

'He was the greatest poet of the Arabs, because he never inserted redundant words, always avoided the uncouth and unfamiliar words and diction in poetry and never praised a man except for his merit'.³

'Umar gave preference to Zuhayr for the literary reasons found in the moulding of forms and coherence of thought. In moulding of forms Zuhayr avoided archaic and crude usages. In coherence of thought he refrained from praising anyone for any qualities that he did not possess.

So 'Umar was the first critic who considered the text in respect of moulding of forms and coherence of thought. In the likewise he was the first to set verdict of criticism on the distinct principles and in his hands criticism entered into a new phase (*Ibrahim 1937: 31*).

With some exceptions, which were brought about by the Prophet (SM) and his Caliphs and some of his companions, literary criticism remained unaltered in the early Islamic age. The Poetry of Hassan, Abdallah b. Abi Rawaha, al-Hutayya and the like, evoked considerable admiration from the people as the poetry of Zuhayr, A'sha and Nabigha did. The critical observations (of this time) did not divorce the expression of

individual opinion regarding Pre-Islamic and early Islamic poetry without having great difference between them. These observations came to the aid of forming a nucleus of critical movement in succeeding ages (*Siddique 1991: 245*).

Arabic literary criticism developed to a great extent in the Umayyad period (661-750 A.D) when the Arabs settled in the towns and cities of the non-Arab countries and were influenced by foreign civilizations in respect of material and intellectual aspects. The progress of research in different branches of knowledge such as grammar, philology and linguistics increased their interest in literature. Hence their literary taste in different field of literature developed (*Dayf 1979: 29*).

General as well as particular assemblies for literary criticism were held in the markets, Mosques, Palaces, dwelling houses in the Umayyad period, where the poets, the rhapsodists, the grammarians, the Caliphs, the Ameer even the army personnels and all other literature loving people en-mass participated. 'Far from being confined to literary circles, the taste for poetry was diffused throughout the whole nation and was cultivated even amidst the fatigues and dangers of war' (*Nicholson 1962: 240*).

The most important place for literary discussions was 'Ma'bad' of Basra (or 'Ukaz of Islam whatever may be called). Here the circles of recitations and disputations as to who was the best poet among the poets, were held. Ma'bad left two vast collections of poetry for the posterity. One is: *al-Naqā'id* (Vituperations/Flytings), like *Naqā'id* of Jarir (d.728) and *al-Farazdaq* (d.728) and *Naqā'id* of Jarir and *al-Akhtal* (d. 712). The second is: *al-Arajiz* or *Rajaz* poems (poems composed in the meter 'Rajaz'), like the *Arajiz* of *al-'Ajjaj* (d.708) and that of *Abu Najam* and of *R'uba b. al-'Ajjaj* (d.762). In addition to aforesaid collections, the other huge collection of poetry was there whose importance was not less and their bulk and volume was not fewer than those of the *Naqā'id* and *Rajaz* poems.

The poets themselves were more important critics in the Umayyad period. Along with the poets, *Ibn Abi 'Atiqe* and *Sukayna bint al-Hosain* of Madina became famous in criticism of poetry. *Ibn Abi 'Atiqe* was renowned for his evaluation of poems of famous

contemporary poet 'Umar bin Abi Rabi'a (d.719). Sukayna used to participate in assemblies of poetic discussions where aristocrats of the Quraysh also remained present to equally share in literary criticism. The assemblies of Sukayna at Madina were more resembling the assemblies of literary criticism of most modern nations of the present time (*Zaydan, ibid: 551*).

Abdul Malik b. Marwan earned name and fame as critic among the Caliphs. He had intrinsic and subtle literary taste. The poets would come to him with their panegyrics. He would straighten them most beautifully and evaluate them with his witty and sharp sense (*Amin, ibid: 395*).

Beyond all doubts, that the basis of unregistered literary criticism related to the pre-Islamic and Umayyad period was nothing but Arabic poetry. Besides the judgments and critical observations of recognised literary critic, scholars and litterateurs, Arabic literature has also preserved critical statements of the laity who got together among the scholars to various poetic recitations and discussions.

The most prominent poets of the Umayyad period are Jarir, al-Farazdaq and al-Akhtal. Once when jarir, reciting his *Qasida-i-umayyah* to the Caliph Abdul Malik, reached the following verses:

وتقول بوزع قد ديت على العصا . هلا هزئت بغير تليا بوزع

The Caliph remarked that he (Jarir) spoiled his finest verses by including the odd names (*Ibn Qutaybah, ibid: 70*).

On another occasion, when al-Akhtal was asked to declare who was the better of the two poets—al-Farazdaq or Jarir – he replied that the former 'cuts the stone and the latter takes water from the ocean'⁴ (*Dayf, ibid: 35*). And when Jarir was asked about al-Akhtal he said that latter was the best poet of them at praise of kings and description of wine and woman⁵ (*Ibn Qutaybah, ibid: 467*).

In the like manner al-Farazdaq passed the verdict on Nabigah Ja'dis poetry that it was a mixture of the highest as well as the lowest specimen⁶ (*Dayf, ibid:34*).

These critical remarks, quoted above for instance, are not mere subjective statements based on individual taste, whim and fancy. If these considered vies about the characteristics of different poets and nature of their poetry are analysed they would indicate that, besides forms and expression, diction and style, emotion, imagination and thought of the poets were also taken into consideration. These critics knew the value of these basic elements of literature and they determined the poet's position on this basis.

It is observed that two groups of literary critics lived side by side from the last part of the seven century. One group consisted of litterateurs namely the poets, the Caliphs, the Ameer and some of the multitudes having literary taste, and the other was a group of scholars like linguistics and grammarians who were inspired by the new Islamic spirit. A new Technique of literary criticism with a sort of objective criteria, based on the principles and fundamental rules of language and grammar, developed in their hands (*Ibrahim ibid: 40*). The most famous of these scholarly critics are Yahya b. Ya 'mar al-Basri, 'Umbasah al-Fil, Abu 'Amar b al-'Ala and Abu Ishague al-Hazrami (*Yusuf. ibid: 80*).

In nutshell, this grammatical scientific criticism came into being in the last part of the Umayyad period. With commencement of the Abbasid period (750-1285) the stems of knowledge spread, the literary criticism became influenced by science and literary taste turned its course towards rules and principles and hence the criticism altered its way from subjectivity to objectivity.

Notes:

1. The term 'Literary Criticism' is used here to cover the field of literary appreciation, analysis, judgment and comparison of literary texts in terms of theory as well as its practice (*Bakallah 1984: 260*).

2. As the Prophet (S M) says:

ان من الشعر لحكمة -انما الشعر كلام فمن الكلام حبيث وطيب - انما الشعر كلام مؤلف فما وافق الحق منه فهو حسن وما لم يوافق الحق منه فلا خير فيه - و اصدق كلمة قالها شاعر قول لبيد^١ الاكل شئ ما خلا الله باطل.

(*Ibn Rashique 1972: 1, 27; Zaydan 1967: 1, 190*).

وكل نعيم لا محالة زائل.

3. The Arabic text is:
هو شعر شعراء العرب لأنه لا يعاقل بين الكلام و لا يتبع خوش الكلام
لا يسع الرجل الا بقلبه .
4. (Ibn Rashique 1972: 1, 81)
الفرزدق ينحت من صخر و جرير يغرق من بحر،
5. T (Dayf 1979: 35)
كان (الاخطل) امدخنا للملوك و انعتنا للخرواحمر.
6. (Ibn Qutaybah 1966: 467)
انه صاحب خلقان عنده مطرف بالآف و خمر بواف.
(Dayf 1979: 34)

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