

LITERARY CRITICISM BEFORE COMPILATION OF WRITTEN WORKS: THE ISSUE OF MA'NA IN THE JAHILIYYAH ERA.

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Abstract:

This paper offers a critical examination of the interface between the tradition and the literary meanings that the early period created and evaluated. Additionally, classical Arabic literary criticism throughout the medieval period was largely impressionistic- a more or less dogmatic expression of personal taste. This paper also examines the roots of this impressionistic tendency. The majority of works about Arabic literary criticism that I have read focus generally on descriptions on stories and related examples. This paper is an attempt to find a theoretical literary basis to understand the underlying mechanism of such literary criticism. It is not my aim to concentrate on an analysis of orality, but rather to show how the feature of literary criticism of that era (i.e. *Jahiliyya*) elucidate the characteristics of the later classical criticism, especially around the issue of *ma'na*.

Introduction:

My interest in the oral period (pre -Islamic through the Umayyad) is that it enables me to imagine myself alive in the exact time in which the criticism of what I called golden era was produced.

*Jahiliyyah*¹ refers to the period of about 150 years before the advent of Islam. Arab society was primitive and isolated, without a unifying political system, where the tribe represented the social organization and political body of societal living. Thus, the tribal traditions that organized and governed people's lives nurtured strong feeling of esprit de corps and fanatical loyalty to their own tribe and its members. Arab culture in this period is characterized as being less developed spiritually² and intellectually, engaged in an ongoing conflicts with a harsh natural environment and in the daily struggle for existence. When Islam came, it denigrated the previous era as one of *jahiliyya*, meaning 'barbarism' or 'ignorance'. This term can also be interpreted as 'aggression'. Tarafat b. al-'Abd, a pre-Islamic master poet, said in his *mu'allaqa*:

*Ala la yaj'alan 'ahadun 'alayna fa najhalu fawqa jahli al-jahilina*³

Listen [oh other tribes] you had better not to [think of] being aggressive to us, if so, we will be more aggressive than they in their aggression against us.

¹It should be observed that the problem of authenticity has been deliberately excluded from the present discussion.

²Arab civilization was characterized by polytheism. The pagan Arabs believed in superior beings that they venerated in stone idols shaped in sometimes bizarre patterns.

³Transliteration is used only when the context demands the Arabic articulation. All the lines of poetry will be included at the end of this paper.

The environmental harshness that the Arab tribes endured caused them to become tough and resistant. Such conditions promote the dominance of power standards, so that in many cases, the more powerful groups and individuals do not desire to observe the rights of the weak, whether as members of the tribe or as individuals. In addition, morals and values usually protect the interests of the more powerful members of the society. Socially, the tribal traditions encouraged habits and feelings of pride and self-importance. This type of fanatic feeling made individuals, and poets particularly, praise their tribes for being victorious whether the situation was fair or not, even if their action was unwarranted aggression or extortion. A pre-Islamic poet describes his relationship to his tribe:

I am just a loyal member following Ghuzayya [my tribe]. When Ghuzayya follows the right path, I will follow it on that path; however, I may become abusive and an eager aggressor if Ghuzayya goes astray.

Ma'na as an Ideal Image and Consistent Description

Pre-Islamic poetry can be described as poetry of description and images. The dominance of the descriptive mode in pre-Islamic poetry is a remarkable phenomenon and it is natural that the criticism would follow the poetry in focusing on this. The following story told by Abu 'Ubayda, Ma'mar Ibn Muthanna is an early example." When Imru' al-Qays (d. 540 CE) escaped from king al-Mundhir b. Ma' al-Sama' (d. about 564 CE.), he settled close to the mountains of Aja' and Salma, where the tribe of Tay' lived. The tribe helped him and gave him refuge; in addition they let him marry a woman among them named Umm Jundub. It was said that women often detested him. Once when he was sleeping next to her, she kept awakening him throughout the night claiming it was the morning [to distant him from her]. In the morning, 'Alqama b. 'Abada al-Fahl [d. about 603 CE] visited Imru' al-Qays, and they discussed their poetry while Umm al-Jundub listened. Imru' al-Qays said, 'I am a more talented poet than you. 'Alqama responded, 'You are mistaken, indeed, my poetry is better than yours.' They started to argue until Imru' al-Qays said, 'Let us compete against each other by composing a poem describing our horses and she-camels, and we will see who wins.' Alqama accepted the contest, saying, 'I accept, and let us have this woman⁴ judge our poetic competition.' Imru' al-Qays recited his poem that starts with:

Oh, my friends, let us pass by [my beloved], Umm Jundub. Let us fulfil the longings of my loving heart.

Then 'Alqama recited his poem, which starts by addressing himself:

You indeed have taken many paths searching for the reason for her abandoning you. Indeed, for her being away from you, is not justified.

When they finished reciting their poems, Umm Jundub delivered a judgement against her husband and in favour of 'Alqama. Then Imru' al-Qays asked her, 'What makes you prefer his poem over mine?' She replied, He described his horse better than you did. Your horse [in your poem] only becomes speedy when you lash him with the lash, goaded him with your foot, and spurred him with your shouting. Do not you say:

⁴ In other sources, the story is that 'Umm Jundub asked each one of them to compose two poems describing their horses with the same rhyming letter. The comparison between meanings is a critical activity that indicates a literary consciousness. In order to make an accurate comparison, 'Umm Jundub as a pre-Islamic critic pays attention to set principles of criticism such as establishing the unity of critical standards. Asking both poets to compose a poem with the same rhyming letter and subject provides a standard indicating a critical consciousness that employs Arabs natural verbal talent of tasting and living their poetry.

The lash makes him [my horse] as a flame. When spurred, he flows abundantly [as rain] , and my shouting makes him mindless [i.e., run fast].

While 'Alqama, on the other hand, showed his horse catching up with the hundred animal while the rein is loosened: his horse was not lashed, kicked, or shouted at. Did you not hear him say:

[My horse] caught up with them [the hunted beasts]; While I was loosening his rein, he was running as a raining cloud.

This judgement angered Imru' al-Qays and he said, 'This is not fair but you have fallen in love with him.' Then, Imru' al-Qays divorced her, and Alqama married her shortly after that. This is why he was called al-Fahl [literally, the studhorse].⁵

Enthusiastic description of physical violence often marks oral poetry. This is why the critics asked the poet to present a vivid picture of what he is describing. They asked that the meaning be embedded in vivid descriptions of energetic images. Walter Ong described oral composition as emphatic and participating rather than objectively distanced. Not only in the use to which knowledge is put, but also in the celebration of physical behaviour, oral cultures reveal themselves as agonistically programmed.⁶ Thus the visible nature of what has been described in pre-Islamic poetry encouraged critics to pay more attention to hyperbole or exaggeration as a poetic element in imagery description.

The two poems in the story above are both considered masterpieces. In reality, the images of both poets are highly artistic, but the element that makes the critic set one above the other is a high level of hyperbole and heroic imagery. Each one of them consists of ten verses describing the poet's horse in a very energetic way. Their descriptions are like a screen showing two alive and vivid images. What struck critic Umm Jundub is seeing 'Alqama's horse as an ideal one that does not need to be motivated or encouraged to run. She compares two meanings, or let us say two images: first, the image of Imru' al-Qays' horse, which only runs by lashing, spurring, and threatening, and then the image of Alqama's horse, which catches up with the hunted animal without pushing.

All the images are highly artistic, and none of the modern critics I have read agree with Umm Jundub because Imru' al-Qays, in the verses that were criticized by her, provides meaning that satisfies her critical standards as well as his rival does. Badawi Tabana pointed out that, "Umm Jundub's opinion would have been acceptable, if Imru' al-Qays meant that his horse only runs when is kicked by foot or threatened by shouting. But, the fact that spurring the horse by lashing is necessary for any rider or knight, whether his horse is lazy or strong, appears to make the argument weak. However, there is no indication that Imru' al-Qays' horse was known for laziness."⁷

In another story involving a literary critique, al-Nabigha criticized Hassan b. Thabit (d. 54/673) for using an ordinary description for his tribe's swords and *jafanat* of their guests, and he, as a critic, does not see the ideal description that attracts his attention in Hassan's lines. In the following story, the most important part is the last (i.e. the critical comment directed to Hassan), but I included the whole story just to show the above-

⁵Muhammad b, Musa al-Marzubani, *al-Muwashshah*, ed. Ali al-Bijawi (Cairo: Dar Nahdat Masr, 1965), p.35.

⁶Walter J, Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 1982), p.44.

⁷Badawi Tabana, *Dirasat fi al-Naqd al-Adabi al-'Arabi* (Cairo: al-'Anglo al-Misriyya, 1969), p. 63.

mentioned merits of enthusiastic description, hyperbole, and ideal image in the lines by other poets. Al-Asma'i narrates that "in Suq 'Ukaz,⁸ they used to build a red tent for al-Nabigha (d. about 604 CE), who received poets and held meetings with them in order to give them his critical opinion about the poems they had recited publicly. Once, al-A'sha, Maymun Ibn Qays (d. 7/629) was the first poet to recite, and he was followed by Hassan b. Thabit and other poets. The last poet was al-Khansa', Tumadir bint 'Amr (d. 24/645) who recited her poem [elegizing her brother, Sakhr and describing him as follows],

As a mountain has a flaming fire at its top, indeed, Sakhr guides those who are travelling at night.

Amazed by her poem, al-Nabigha commented, I would have said you are most fluent poet among humans and jinn (demons), if Abu Basir [i.e., al-A'sha] had not already recited to me.' Hassan became upset upon hearing al-Nabigha's admiring comments to both al-Khansa' and al-A'sha and said, By God, I am more skillful in poetry than you and your father.' Then, al-Nabigha replied, Oh, my friend, you are not skilful enough to compose [as I did in my poem],

You are just like night, which overspread me even though I would think (mistakenly) that remote distance (is enough for me to escape).

[Your power to bring whom you want] is as clutches that are connected to strong ropes that are grasped by strong hands.

After hearing al-Nabigha's criticism, Hassan made no response. Al-Nabigha criticized Hassan for the lines in which he praised himself and his people expecting al-Nabigha to approve of this:

[My tribe] is known to have big white *jafanat* [for guests] which shine in the forenoon, and our swords are flowing with blood.

[We are proud that] we are the mother side of Bani 'Anqa' and Muharriq. What a great mother side we are.

Then, al-Nabigha said, "You are indeed a good poet, but you shrank the number of your swords and *jafanat*. Also, I am wondering how could you honour yourself by being proud of the ones [that your tribe's women gave birth to] but, you did not show yourself to be proud of your forefathers?"⁹

The pre-Islamic critics' inclination toward an ideal image and description drew their attention toward what attracts visually. The critic's perspective worked within an agenda of the visible: size, number, capacity, shape, material, colour, or any other visible merit for the described items or images. The poet's descriptions tended toward hyperbole because otherwise, the critic or audience would ask, Why it is what describing?

Pre-Islamic critics did not view the description of objects as simply a way to celebrate these items. These descriptions enriched the audience's imagination with the attributes and values in Arab life that they represented. Hassan's description of objects shows how they belonged to the generous Arab world. The described items are shown to be superior with respect to their materials and their quantity. A description of

⁸Suq 'Ukaz was a well-known annual commercial and cultural marketplace during the pre-Islamic period. Poets used to recite their poetry there and receive acknowledgement or criticism.

⁹Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, *Sharh Shawahid al-Mughni*, ed. Muhammad Ahmad Jad al-Mawla, 'Ali al-Bijawi, and Muhammad Abu al-Fadl (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr, 1972), vol.1, p.22.

any object (horse, sword, *jafanat*) from pre-Islamic poetry was often linked to excellence in war and social life. Thus, the fact that the objects the poets selected for description became the focus of critical evaluation should not shift our focus toward the purely material features. Critics when scrutinizing such described objects and images, were not concerned only with the objects themselves, but also with the individuals and values with which they were associated.

The Role of Single Words Meaning

Pre-Islamic critics devoted part of their attention to the poet's use of vocabulary.¹⁰ They criticized poets' word choice when their detonations did not fit poetic taste or led toward incompatibility in the poetic meanings. In the above story of al-Nabigha, Hassan was criticized for using words that represented a small number because Hassan used *asyaf* (swords) and *jafanat* (tureens), which both are considered minor plural in Arabic philology (i.e., indicating the number from 3 to 9). Instead, he should have used the regular plurals, *suyuf* and *jifan*. Abu Bakr al-Suli (d. 335/947) commented on al-Nabigha's criticism, "Look at this beautiful critical comment which indicates the firmness of the critic's speech and his eloquence of style. He said to Hassan, "You decrease your swords and tureens' because *asyaf* and *jafanat* are *jam' qilla* (minor plural) while the real plurals should be *suyuf* and *jifan* respectively."¹¹

A related issue here is that Arabs during the pre-Islamic era would not have practiced criticism that was based on semantic and lexicographical meaning. Taha Ibrahim doubts that Arabs during that time knew the meanings that were related to grammatical or morphological terms such as *jam'u qilla*. Also, he claims they did not have the grammatical thinking to distinguish between the concepts as grammarians did later. According to Ibrahim, al-Nabigha was not familiar with terms like minor plural and only a person familiar with grammatical terminology, who knew the difference between word's connotations and understood logic, could produce such criticism.¹²

Ibrahim's argument that al-Nabigha lacked a grammatical term, is not justified. Pre-Islamic people, particularly poets such as al-Nabigha, were the most skilful and eloquent native speakers of the language. In a sense, poets are language professionals, and they know their language works. Ibrahim's point would be valid if the story told that al-Nabigha used terminology such as minor plural. The term *jam'u qilla* was not known at that time- such grammatical terms were produced decades later during the Islamic period. 'Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani himself makes a statement that contribute to my point: "What must be considered is the concept behind the terminology, not the terminologies themselves."¹³ He indicates that in this case, al-Nabigha knew what it meant to use a word that denotes a minor plural although he could not have known the term as it later appeared in the grammatical works. We should accept al-Nabigha as a reference and authentic source who inspired grammarians later on to comprehend the concept of their grammatical analysis when they created their own terms – grammarians and lexicographers were themselves inspired by pre-Islamic people to build their grammatical thinking. Badawi Tabana confirms that grammarians like

¹⁰ In the subsequent centuries, the complex nature of the Arabic language in terms of its varieties in vocabulary and derivation made it crucial for Arab to pay attention to word choice in poetic language. To fully realized the importance of such phenomena, note that classical Arab scholars composed many special dictionaries and lexicons to treat linguistic and semantic issues such as *ishtirak lafzi* (homonymy) and *taraduf* (synonymy); these are devoted to treating a large number of names, adjectives, and nouns, that are used in Arabic to describe things and objects.

¹¹ Al-Suyuti, *Sharh Shawahid al-Mughni*, p. 256.

¹² Taha, Ahmad Ibrahim, *Tarikh al-Naqd al-Adabi 'ind al-'Arab* (Cairo: Lajnat at-Ta'lif wa al-Tarjama, 1937), p. 27.

¹³ Badawi, *Tabana, Dirasat fi Naqd al-Adabi al-Arabi* (Cairo: Anglo-Misriyya, 1969), p.64.

Sibawayh (d. 180/793) and al-Khalil bn Ahmad (d. 175/791) relied on pre-Islamic poets like al-Nabigha when they established their analysis of grammatical functions and concepts.¹⁴

Al-Nabigha's critique represents a problem in word choice or artistic purpose. The implications of the two words *jafanat* and *asyaf* do not serve the poetic image; however, at the same time, they do not represent a semantic mistake. They are not very good, yet not really wrong. Al-Nabigha's criticism was devoted, as we mentioned before, to asking poets produce an ideal image. Literary taste required the proper word choice, one compatible with the poetic purpose. In *al-Muwashshah*, Muhammad b. 'Imran al-Marzubani (d. 371/981) tells how al-A'sha praised Qays b. Ma'di Yakrib in a long poem: When al-A'sha reached the verse,

I am familiar with the virtues of Qays, even though I have not met him. They claimed,
'He is the best of Yemeni people.'

Then a man criticized al-A'sha, or may be the praised man criticized him, for using the verb *za'ama* (they claimed). Such criticism made him pay attention and fix his verse; thus al-A'sha replaced the italicized phrase with 'He became the chief of the people of Yemen.'¹⁵ In this example, the word 'claim' is viewed by al-Marzubani to be not the proper one for the poetic purpose because it implies a level of uncertainty about virtues of the one being praised. The word's implication did not fit the level of tact and diplomacy required by the situation. In *Lisan al-'Arab*, "The verb *za'ama* is used whether the phrase is true or false. The scholars of Arabic said, 'When a speaker says dhakara 'to mention', it indicates that the speaker is positive about his statement. But when the speaker is not sure [if it is true or false] he would use the verb *za'ama*.'"¹⁶

Some pre-Islamic criticism corrected the poet's word choice. In other cases, words were criticized as wrong usage. When a signification of a word does not serve the poetic purpose and context, then the word is in the wrong place. For example, Abu 'Ubayda Ma'mur b. Muthanna told this story of one of the pre-Islamic poets that 'Al-Musayyab b. 'Alas'¹⁷ passed by a council of people. They asked him to recite one of his poems. When he reached the verse:

I might relax by forgetting my sorrow when it comes by [riding] a camel that is impressed with
Say'ariyya

The poet Tarafa b. al-'Abd (d. about 564 CE) who was a teen at that time, was listening to al-Musayyab while playing with some boys and said [criticizing the poem], 'The camel is feminized'¹⁸ Al-Musayyab turned to Tarafa and said, 'Get the hell out of here.'¹⁹ He asked the boy, 'Show me your tongue,' and continued, 'this tongue will bring you a lot of grief.'²⁰ Al-Musayyab made a mistake in his word choice because, in Arab culture, *say'ariyya* is an impress, or a mark, for a she-camel, while al-Musayyab in this poem was describing a male camel. Unlike Hassan and al-'Asha's words, which were criticized because they didn't fulfil the poetic purpose and were considered less artistic, al-Musayyab's word choice was criticized

¹⁴Tabana, *Dirasat fi Naqd al-Adab al-Arabi*, p.66.

¹⁵ Muhammad 'Imran b. Musa al-Marzubani, *al-Muwashshah*, ed. 'Ali al-Bijawi (Cairo: Dar Nahdat Misr, 1965), p.98.

¹⁶Muhammad b. Mukarram Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-'Arab*. (Beirut: Dar Sadr, 1955) z-'-m.

¹⁷ In other narration, the poet is al-Mutalammis Jarir Ibn 'Abd al-Masih al-Dhuba'i.

¹⁸ Or 'the camel became a she-camel.'

¹⁹ The literal translation is 'Go to your mom, may a calamity befall you.'

²⁰ Al-Marzubani, *al-Muwashshah*, 98; Ibn Qutayba, *Kitab al-Shi'r wa al-Shu'ara'*, p.88.

because it is semantically wrong. Generally speaking, critics did not tolerate mistakes in words choice because it would result in wrong attributions.

Ma'na as an Ethical Value.

Early Arab culture mingled social values with literary aesthetics. The observed critical meanings were in reality conservative values. In the pre-Islamic period, as a primarily oral culture, it stored its values in the societal memory, and the members of the society had to invest great energy in speaking and keeping alive the values that had been learned arduously over the ages. Walter Ong stated, "This need establishes a highly traditionalist or conservative set of mind that with good reason inhibits intellectual experimentation."²¹ Al-Suyuti narrates that Hatim al-Ta'i (d. 46/578) an Arab who is known for his generosity, "Once heard Mutalammis' poem:

Little money will remain, when it is saved, when big money will not prosper with misspending.

Keeping money is better than being poor and travelling in lands without provisions.

Al-Ta'i said, 'My God! Cut this poet's tongue because he encourages people toward niggardliness; rather he should say,

Never spending for the sake of generosity would waste money, and stinginess never would increase the money that is owned by a niggard.

Do not keep money while living in tightfistedness. Indeed tomorrow sustenance will come."²²

Hatim criticized Mutalammis for bringing a meaning that goes against Arabs' encouragement of absolute generosity and interdependence without any fear of poverty. Pre-Islamic tribes felt proud of their values and liked to be praised for their generosity, helping the needy and giving refuge to strangers. Thus the criticism is a reflection of how much Arabic classical poetry functioned as an essential part of a social system that had a specific set of values to uphold.

Historically, Arabs of the Arabian Desert were known for they maintained values, rules, and noble traditions that governed their lives. They responded to the harshness of their environment, which enhanced their inclination to struggle and face challenges among themselves, by shaping a psyche that was both strict and tough. At the same time, they set up a system of values and morals that represented the highest social contribution toward others.

For example, the books of *akhbar* (accounts) narrated how ancient Arabs sacrificed a great deal to fulfil their societal duties and values, and keep their morals alive. Since these values and morals influenced their poetry, especially the panegyric, it follows that part of their criticism would be devoted to the same. This would explain the flourishing of the poetry of *fakhr* (self-praise) of the values and actions of tribes, extolling their nobility of descent, generosity towards the needy, and hospitality toward strangers. In criticism, any poetic theme that went against such values would be rejected.

²¹ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 1982), p. 41.

²² Suyuti al-Jalal al-Din, *Sharh Shawahid al-Mughni*, ed. Muhammad Ahmad Jad al-Mawla, 'Ali al-Bijawi, and Muhammad Abu al-Fadl (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr, 1972), p. 209

As a result, meanings were governed by tradition. Al-Nabigha's criticism of the meaning in Hassan's poetry expresses a traditional view more than a criterion. As a critic, al-Nabigha, evaluated Hassan's meaning by examining the poem according to societal traditions. He found it incompatible because Arab tradition would not approve of describing one's swords or *jafanat* as ordinary. Such a description does not reflect tribal strength and bravery. The poet must show the ultimate level of generosity and bravery because he echoes the tribe's traditional values.

One remarkable phenomenon related to the link between tradition and literary criticism is that most of the stories take the shape of dialogue. Sometimes, when reading such stories, we feel we are witnessing a conversation in a social council instead of being in a critical situation. Historians of orality are in apparent agreement that it fosters aggregative social and conversational action rather than individual effort. In an oral society, people are members of a 'collective assemblage' – to use a phrase provided by Deleuze Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*- before they are isolated individuals (if they are ever such).²³

Vagueness in Meanings.

Pre-Islamic Arabs practiced a kind of criticism of meaning that is considered incomplete now. The accounts of literature and criticism narrate incidents where a poet composes a verse or two, intending a panegyric or a specific subject, but his audience asks him to compose more verses to clarify his previous meaning. Al-Marzubani describes how al-Nabigha as a poet once praised the King al-Nu'man b. al-Mundhir as follows:

Earth will feel you as a lightweight when you die, while you are so heavy in your lifetime.

Then, al-Nu'man responded, 'This verse is closer to satire than to praise. You have to continue composing something that explain it further.' Al-Nabigha found it difficult to continue composing more verse at that moment to clarify his previous meaning and the King to give him more time. The King accepted and said, 'I will give you three days. You have to compose a verse that explains it. If you do so, I will reward you with a hundred of my best camels; otherwise, I will be given you a blow by a sword that brings back from you what you fled with [i.e., insulting the king].' Al-Nabigha came to Zuhayr b. Abi Sulma (d. 609) [one of the pre-Islamic master poets] and told him the story. Zuhayr said, 'Let us walk in the wild land, indeed poetry comes from there [i.e. the desert inspires poets to compose.]'²⁴ Then, Zuhayr's son, the teenager b. Zuhayr (d. 26/645), wanted to join them, but his father asked him to go back. However, al-Nabigha said to Zuhayr, 'Let the son of my friend [i.e., Ka'b] join us.' The two great poets tried to compose something for the purpose, but could not. Then, the young Ka'b came up with a verse with the same meter and rhyming letter and said, "Why don't you say,

You indeed, occupy its glory [holding its center] in order that its two sides will not be imbalanced."

Then, al-Nabigha said, 'We got it! I swear by God that we [he and Zuhayr] are fruitless. I will give you, oh son of my friend, what the King would reward me.' But the young Ka'b asked, 'What is the prize?' al-

²³ Gilles Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 19.

²⁴ There is a legend that ancient Arab poets would ride out into the desert to summon their jinnis (demons.)

Nabigha said, 'A hundred of the best camels of the King al-Nu'man,' Ka'b refused this offer.²⁵ It seems that the king understood the poet's actually laudatory purpose, but he was interested in a more elegant expression, as was the custom of the kings who sought fun by teasing poets.

But what concerns us is that the story implies that the critic, i.e., the king, was in doubt regarding the first semi-abstract description. He did not get the overall image, but was worried about being described in two opposite ways: once as a lightweight and then as heavy. This illustrates the 'situational rather than abstract'²⁶ quality of orally based thought and expression. The oral culture tended to use descriptions and images in situational, operational frames of reference that were minimally abstract in the sense that they remained close to the living human world. When Zuhayr used an image of a semi abstract nature, making the king something very big that affects the whole earth, a cosmic entity, the critic asked for more elaboration and explanation, for something more apprehensible.

The issue of incomplete meaning or ambiguity was not particularly significant for the pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods. It is rare that we have a story conveying that Arabs did not understand a poem at that time. One could say the Arab tongue was not affected by external factors like *lahn*. In addition, the language of poetry was the language of daily life, dominated by direct expressions and description without ambiguity.

Understanding the difference between clarity and simplicity is essential to comprehending the literary mentality of that period. Some modern critics view pre-Islamic criticism as simple. In their analyses, ancient critics such as al-Nabigha and Umm Jundub do not represent the analytical deep thinking that can shape more sophisticated literary criticism. For example, Badawi Tabana generalizes that simplicity is an attribute that can be ascribed to pre-Islamic criticism. I would argue that Tabana analysis ignores the fundamentally oral nature of Arab culture. Tabana fails to consider the psychodynamics of pre-Islamic literary critical production. One should first study critical attempts during that period through the lens of the dominant culture's mentality order to measure accurately the range of measure accurately the range of success that those critics achieved.

The quick critical evaluation does not reflect simplicity; rather it reflects the critical tradition that is embedded in the literary practice. In reality, a pre-Islamic critic was asked to produce his or her opinion at once when the poem was recited. Therefore, most of these opinions were articulated extemporaneously. This is why the oral habits of thought and expression entailed short and pithy statements. Naturally, no one would expect that an entire panel be held to evaluate the poems of Imru' Al-Qays and 'Alqama, for instance. To appreciate Umm Jundub and al-Nabigha's quick judgement, we should imagine the pressure that the critic must have gone through. This reminds me of Ong's admonition that "fully literate persons can only with great difficulty imagine what a primary oral culture is like."²⁷

Repetitive and Imitative Meaning:

As with oral cultures generally, traditional motifs in the pre-Islamic poetic canon were repeated again and again. Pre-Islamic poets were aware of this repetition. The earliest evidence of this can be traced

²⁵ Al-Marzubani, *al-Muwashshah*, p.98.

²⁶ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 1982), p.49.

²⁷ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p.31.

back to Imru' al-Qays' comment on the tradition of yearning at 'atalal (ruins of the beloved's dwelling) described by a poet named Ibn Khadhami or Hadhami, who seems to have been the founder of that tradition:

Let us turn to the old ruin to express our yearning as Ibn Khadhami used to yearn.

We do not know anything about Ibn Khadhami. It is difficult to trace the early stages in the development of pre-Islamic poetry due to lack of written records. We do know that the pre-Islamic poets were well aware that they imitated each other, especially their predecessors. Some poets criticized themselves for implicitly imitating and repeating the meaning of what had been articulated before. Zuhayr pointed out this phenomenon without providing any explanation:

There is nothing new in our meanings, but repeated and borrowed words. Zuhayr's verse is an admission that such practice existed. Classical critics such as Ibn Qutayba viewed this repetition of meanings as an obstacle that prevented the earlier poets from being more creative and original.

'Antara al-'Absi (d. circa, 600 A.D.), a famous pre-Islamic poet, felt himself chained by the need to reiterate ancient themes, which gave him the feeling that poetic meanings had been exhausted by the earlier poets. This helps to explain his being among what is known as the *muqillun* (poets who composed few poems). When 'Antara composed his Mu'allaha, he complained that most of the meanings had been used before with very little left for him: Have the earlier poets left any meaning for us?...

WE see that Zuhayr and 'Antara were among the first poets to pay attention to critique of the poetic process as such. Their criticism is devoted to creative process as a whole, not to specific single lines, descriptions, or images. Their aim was to call poets' attention to the phenomenon. They presented their observations in a somewhat negative tone, as if asking poets to do something to resolve this problem or at least to apologize before their audiences. Some pre-Islamic poets felt uncomfortable with the influence of previous examples. For instance, poets were encouraged to stop yearning at the abandoned ruins and describe their journey and she-camels instead. 'Antara and Zuhayr were the poets who wished to inspire a tendency toward innovation in pre-Islamic poetry.

However, the major pre-Islamic poems still followed the pattern of yearning at the ruins followed by a description of their she-camels, the journey, and finally the journey's goal. Their use of earlier meanings, and descriptions, is called *sariqat shi'riyya* (appropriations). This phenomenon motivated debate and research among both classical critics and modern critics. A vivid example of such a borrowing is found in the poems of Imru' al-Qays and 'Alqama dedicated to Umm Jundub, where many single lines were practically identical. Another example is Tarafa's second single line in his *mu'allaha*, which is stolen from the fifth verse of Imru' al-Qays' *mu'allaha*, where the only difference is the rhyming word *tajalladi* instead of *tajammali*.

The repetition in meaning in pre-Islamic poetry is closely tied to the oral tradition, where element-based thought tends to rely on fixed formulas. Oralists such as Walter Ong found that formulae are repeated again and again in such traditions because, in the absence of written text, information must be organized and

transmitted by memory. When the critic selected a specific part or verse to criticize, he received it from the production of sounds that were heard once.²⁸

When Umm Jundub stated her critical evaluation, no visual presence of the words was available to her; the critical process was one of recalling the images from the poetry she had just heard. To appreciate Umm Jundub's selection, for example, we should try to imagine the difference between oral and literate memorization. The verbal memory is understandably a valued asset in oral cultures. However, the way verbal memory worked in oral art forms is quite different from what we might imagine. In a literature a verbatim memorization is commonly done from a text to which the memorizer returns in order to analyze and assess it. But critics like Umm Jundub and others worked from memory. Ong generalized that oral performance is intended for an immediate presentation. Likewise, the critic had to produce a literary evaluation immediately upon hearing a long poem.

Poetic meanings were more situational than abstract. Critics did not review other meanings to see whether the poet treated the same issue properly. For example, Umm Jundub did not examine the following verse of 'Imru' al-Qays, which carries the same virtue as that that she praised 'Alqama for; i.e., his horse has caught up with the beast of prey with great effort. Umm Jundub criticized Imru' al-Qays without considering that in the following verses he described his horse according to her standard. The historical context shows her true reasons for her criticism, and her unjust judgement was not based on an impartial review of the two poems in their entirety.

Abstract philosophical thinking was minimal in that culture. As we can see, al-Nabigha's concept of merit was determined concretely in the local literary atmosphere. Critical judgements were decidedly not based on logical abstractions or principles. They were illustrated only by random situations and examples. The deduction of meaning by Umm Jundub was hardly analytical. Meanings at that time were close to the world of actual human life, the realm of war and hunting, things that were visible and tangible.

Pre-Islamic critics came from various classes, but the best of them form a special class. We do have a few cases of non-specialist such as Umm Jundub producing criticism on occasion. However, there was a class of specialist poets who worked critics, such as al-Nabigha, whose position according to an early story was formalized. He sat in a special red tent to evaluate other poets. He belonged to the class of poets who frequented the courts of kings and made a living off poetry working outside their own tribal milieu. Historically, the lakhmids and, to a lesser degree, the ghassanids, were the kings whom poets sought out for praise and reward. For al-Nabigha, being a court poet might afford him the special that he had at *Suq 'Ukaz*. Other poets who were considered to be of a lower status could not achieve the level of an established critic. There were many of these in the pre-Islamic period; among the best known names are al-A'sha and al-Hutay'a (d.30/650).

The role of pre-Islamic traditional in the importance of *Lafz* (verbal utterance)

The stress on the importance of *lafz* among the later critics can be related to the importance of voice in pre-Islamic poetry. During the subsequent centuries, *lafz* came to denote the musicality of ornamental language and a decorative word choice. One explanation may be that pre-Islamic poetry was born as a song .it was

²⁸ See, Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p.41.

developed as something heard and not read, sung and not written. Ali Ahmad Sa'id (the poet Adonis) described it thus: 'the voice of this poetry was the very breath of life.'²⁹ Hassan b. Thabit, the mukhadram poet composed:

Sing in every poem you compose. The song is poetry's domain.

The fact that ancient Arab poetry was recited and sung asserts the importance of styles of articulation. Historically, classical poets of the pre-Islamic period, whether in formal conferences at *Suq 'Ukaz*, in the battlefield, or in social gatherings, considered the skill of reciting poetry essential to capture the audience's attention. 'Abd al-Rahman b. Khaldun (d.808/1406) stated, "In the early period, singing was the art of literature, because it depended on poetry, being the setting of poetry to music."³⁰ He thus stressed the link between vocal performance and poetry, and asserted the importance of *lafz* as being of equal importance to *ma'na*.

When a poem was recited in such a culture in the form of a song, in reality what was heard was not the words and expressions but rather the intonation. As 'Ali Sa'id described it "The signifier is no longer an isolated word, but a word bound to a voice, a music-word. It is not merely an indication of a certain meaning, but energy replete with signs, the self transformed into speech-song, life in the form of language."³¹ In such an oral culture, restriction of words to sound determines the modes of expression because language is a mode of action and not simply a countersign of thought.

Oralists emphasize that words in such a culture have no visual presence. The power of decoration and diction comes from the fact that oral peoples commonly, and probably universally, consider words in themselves to have great power.³² Sound cannot be projected without the use of power; this is why poets were known for their *sawt jahwari* (loud voice).

CONCLUSION:

The earliest discussions of *ma'na* usually involved critical evaluations of a line of poetry.³³ They dealt with the predominant literary taste, metaphoric implications, literal meaning, and the poet's intention behind a poetic idea or theme. For some critics, a good *ma'na* was closely linked to tribal virtues and values such as hospitality, generosity, and bravery. These primeval critical musings established the foundations of later literary criticism that focused on thematic innovation and elegance in poetic meaning and image. The main characteristic of pre-Islamic culture that influence subsequent literary production was that pre-Islamic poetry was one of visual images and direct description. For pre-Islamic poets and listeners, the occurrence of a series of visual images was the normal mode of thought. This descriptive mood and imagery influenced those later generations of critics, especially during the 'Abbasid age, who opposed the so-called "new style". The new style was seen as a departure from the dominant imagery and direct descriptive nature of pre-Islamic poetry because it relied heavily on "intellectual," elaborate figures of speech and discourse that was

²⁹ Sa'id, Ali Ahmad. *An Introduction to Arab Poetic*, trans. Catherine Cobham (London: Saqi Books, 1990), p.5.

³⁰ 'Abd al-Rahman b. Khaldun, *al-Muqaddima* (Beirut: Dar al-Sadr, 1967), p.569.

³¹ Sa'id, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, p. 16.

³² Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, p.32.

³³ Here, I am using views and perspectives of mainstream Arabic literary critics and the general views that were shared among most of the critical schools.

known as *al-madhab al-kalami* (dialectical mannerism). This help to explain why many later literary critics *tab'* (naturalness) over against *ma'na* (affected or artificial style), arguing that the former was more akin to the genuine Arab style.

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