



Origin and Development of Arabic poetry in pre- Islamic period: A Discussion

Dr. Mahbubur Rahman

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Arabic, Nabajyoti College, Kalgachia, Barpeta, Assam, India

Received: 09.11.2025; Accepted: 21.11.2025; Available online: 30.11.2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Scholar Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

Abstract

The condition of Arab society gradually deteriorated after the Prophet Jesus (pbuh). A large number of the people of the country lived a Bedouin life. They moved frequently in search of food, water and green land and preferred a nomadic lifestyle. Although the education and social environment of the people of the pre-Islamic era was not advanced, their literary attitude fuelled their literary practice. The Arabs of that era were very skilled in writing poetry and poetry was of immense importance in society. The poetry of the Jahili era occupied the only place in the intellectual thought of that era. The poetry of the pre-Islamic era reflects the political, economic, social, moral and all aspects of that era. Even pre-Islamic poetry contains genealogies, and accounts of significant events. As soon as the poems of the pre-Islamic period were written, they were memorized and preserved by word of mouth. Moreover, the pre-Islamic era (Jāhiliyyah) represents the most significant and remarkable phase in the development of Arabic literature. This art form began as spoken tradition, capturing the feelings, beliefs, and daily experiences of Arabian society prior to the advent of Islam. Within their communities, poets enjoyed high status and functioned as record-keepers and representatives of their respective clans. The craft transformed from basic tribal songs into the sophisticated qasīdah (ode), distinguished by uniform rhyme schemes and regular rhythmic patterns. Central subjects encompassed romance, courage, honor, tribute, and mourning. Notable literary figures including Imru' al-Qais, Antarah ibn Shaddad, and Zuhayr ibn Abi Sulma enhanced this artistic medium through vivid descriptions and masterful language.

Key words: Pre- Islamic, Arabic poetry, origin, development, etc.

Introduction:

The pre-Islamic period usually refers to the period after the Prophet Jesus (pbuh) to 622 AD. In other words, the pre-Islamic era is called the era of ignorance, which began 150 years before the advent of Islam. It is a well-known fact that writing was not practiced among the northern Arabs at that time. The ancient history, legends, proverbs and poetic literature provide us with necessary information about that era. An inscription found in an ancient tomb at Alnamara dates back to 328 AD witnesses the pre-Islamic period. The inscriptions found at Jabad of southeast Aleppo, al-Lazat Harran and Umm al-Jimal talk about 512 and 568 ADS respectively. These inscriptions are written in Arabic, Syriac and Greek languages. Research has shown that these inscriptions are older than South Arabic and North Arabic. Many inscriptions of the period of Himyari and Sawayi of Southern

Arabic language are found and most of which were written on clay slates in the eighth century BC.¹

The second source of information about the pre-Islamic period is the poetry of the Pre Islamic period. The Arabs of that era were very skilled in writing poetry and poetry was of immense importance in society. The poetry of the Jahili era occupied the only place in the intellectual thought of that era. The poetry of the pre-Islamic era reflects the political, economic, social, moral and all aspects of that era. Even pre-Islamic poetry contains genealogies, and accounts of significant events. As soon as the poems of the pre-Islamic period were written, they were memorized and preserved by word of mouth. Thus, poetry develops culture and cultural ideas among people.

Another important source of pre-Islamic literature is proverbs. Proverbs are brief statements at a particular moment that indicate a particular event or situation. An examination of the proverbs of the pre-Islamic period reveals a lot of information about that era. One of the mediums that introduced us to the pre-Islamic period was prose literature, traditions and legends, stories and anecdotes, advices of scholars that were collected and preserved during the later Abbasid period. For example, the same can be said of *Kitabul Agani*. In which Abul Faraz Isbahani mentions the music, poetry and history of that era. etc. can be mentioned as the sources of information of the pre-Islamic period.

Impact of Arabic Literature on the Pre-Islamic society:

It is difficult to say how Arabic literature of the Jahiliyyah period was or when it began. This is because recording was not widely used in the pre-Islamic period. From the study of history, we learn that the condition of Arab society gradually deteriorated after the Prophet Jesus (pbuh). A large number of the people of the country lived a Bedouin life. They moved frequently in search of food, water and green land and preferred a nomadic lifestyle. Although the education and social environment of the people of the pre-Islamic era was not advanced, their literary attitude fuelled their literary practice. Thus, literature was born in Arab society in the pre-Islamic period. Arabic literature can be divided into two categories: prose and poetry. Prose literature can be divided into two categories.

The literature narrated by the astrologers uses short rhetorical language. Their verses were described in complicated words and incomprehensible language. Lectures have a special place in the age of ignorance. The speeches of certain individuals, scholars, intellectuals and leaders have influenced Arab society. Sometimes speakers use speech techniques, genres, shapes, verses, rhythms of poetry, proverbs, etc. to make their descriptions more interesting. Their speeches included accounts, statement, deathbeds, and parental advice to their children in very simple language. Among the famous speakers of the pre-Islamic period were Qush bin Sa'ada al-Ayadi, Amr bin Ma'di Karb and Aksam bin Sayfi.²

Poetry was one of the sources of Arabic literature in the pre-Islamic period. Poetry occupied the first place as the main medium of communication. They are memorized by strong memory and used to describe events, descriptions, advices, sayings, settle disputes, etc. on various subjects in public society. Sometimes interpretations of poems by other

¹ P.K. Hitti. *Arab Zahir Itihas*. P-94, Kolkata, 1999.

² Dewan, Alom Hussain. *Arabi Sahityaor somu Buronji*. p- 76-78. Nagaon, 2002.

poets have been presented through some professional poets. As a result, the poems of the pre-Islamic period have influenced the new styles of composition, wording, etc. of other famous poets. Najd, Hijaz, Bahrain, etc. became the literary centres of the period through the efforts of literary lovers. Because of many uses of the rhetoric of language and the diction of the words, the language of the pre-Islamic period was chosen as the medium of interpretation of various texts in Islam.

Compilers of Arabic poetry:

Scholars who compiled Arabic poetry have been instrumental in protecting and influencing the Arabic literary heritage. Beginning in the early Islamic era, academics and language experts gathered spoken verses to preserve the linguistic and cultural legacy of Arab civilization. Among the most important early endeavours was Al-Mufaḍḍaliyyāt, assembled by Al-Mufaḍḍal al-Ḍabbī during the 8th century, which brought together pre-Islamic and early Islamic verses. In the same manner, Abū Tammām (who died in 845 CE) created the *Ḥamāsah*, a renowned collection that arranged poems according to subject matter, establishing a framework for subsequent compilations.

Ibn Qutaybah (who passed away in 889 CE) and Al-Jāḥiẓ also made valuable contributions by assembling and analyzing poetic compositions within extensive literary and linguistic research. Another significant compilation was the *Kitāb al-Aghānī* ("The Book of Songs") by Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī (who died in 967 CE), which maintained not only verse but also biographical information and cultural background.

Subsequently, intellectuals including Al-Buḥturī, Al-Marzūqī, and Andalusian collectors such as Ibn Bassām continued this practice, modifying it for emerging cultural hubs. By means of their collections, these scholars guaranteed the passage of Arabic poetry through successive generations, allowing future scholars and audiences to value its linguistic depth, ethical wisdom, and artistic excellence.

In view of the importance of pre-Islamic poetry, the poems of the same period have been copied and preserved in the Islamic period. Among the popular compilers are Hammad al-Rawī (713-785 A.D.) and Caliph al-Ahmar (d. 796 A.D.). Like poetry, prose literature has undergone many changes. The prose was written in short sentences on a variety of independent themes from beginning to end, the narrator's name, family identity, who narrated it from whom, to whom, etc. are mentioned in prose literature. This is called *isnad*. Thus, the literary practice of the pre-Islamic period gradually continued in the Islamic period, the Umayyad period, the Abbasid period and the modern period.³

Impact of Literature:

The influence of pre-Islamic literature is fully reflected in Arab society. This is because Arabic literature, which dealt with the whole aspects of society at that time, depended on sectarian conflict, war, and was instigated through human speech and poetry. Others tried to settle the dispute. Zuhayr bin Abi Salma's name may be mentioned here in this regard. He wrote poems praising two leaders of the Jubayan dynasty to end the dynastic war between the famous Abs and the Jubayan dynasty, Dahis and Gabra. Thus, through the poetry Umayya bin Abi Sallat tried to end the war of the people who wrote a poem in praise of two leaders of the Jubayan dynasty. In this way he taught the people about spirituality through his poetry. Hatim Tai is famous in history for his generosity and

³ Nadwi, Hasan Rabi. *Tarikh al-Adab al- Arabi*. P- 72- 77. Lukhnow, 1989.

humanity, etc. in the pre-Islamic era. Thus, Arabic literature of the pre-Islamic period had a significant influence on Arab society.⁴

Origin and development:

It is a well-known fact that Arabic poetry of pre-Islamic period is very ancient. Its origin is believed to have been the alteration, refinement and development of the ancient ornate prose 'Saj', which contained the astrologers' allied letters and similarities, and later took the form of Arabic poetry. According to Arab historian Jurji Jaidan, camel drivers at that time used to sing songs called 'Huda songs' to accelerate the camels. The Arabic poem Huda is a sequel to the song. Other scholars say that when a man named Muzr bin Najjar fell from the back of his camel and broke his arm, he lamented ايداه وايداه (Ayadaah Wa ayadah, meaning 'Oh hand, oh hand). The 'huda' or camel driver's song began with a two-syllable four- to six-verse phrase, which differs from 'rajy' in that it has no such rhythm. The process of selection of rhyme in poetry begins with this, which is called poetry in Arabic- الشعر قول موزون مقفى يدل على المعنى

The most popular critic of South African ibn Rashiq's view on the origins of Arabic poetic literature is "Arabic poetry was originally verbal. Eventually the Arabs used it for various purposes of daily life such as encouraging war, celebrating birthdays, describing war, teaching genealogy, manners and praising people. It was that the measurement (meter) was determined to maintain verbal balance then it was called a *sher* or poem." In addition to the 'Saj' and 'Rajya' among the Arabic poems, another long form of poetry was found at that time, they were called qasida. The qasida was born in the pre-Islamic period. Each clan considered itself to be the first poet. The first to compose qasida poetry were Imraul Qays of the Yemen community, Abid bin Awras of the Banu Asad tribe, and Muhalhil of the Taghlib tribe.

Pre-Islamic poetry was circulated orally in society. The Arabs, who possessed extraordinary memories, gained popularity through narrative. Each poet read poems by his guru poet and other poets and showcased his poetic talent to the public. Most of the poets of that time were illiterate. Reading and writing was not as easy as it is today.

We are all aware of the political situation in the pre-Islamic era. There was no limit to sectarian conflict and infighting in that chaotic society. Poets played a role in sectarian warfare. They were encouraged and inspired by poetry. Although the advent of Islam created some obstacles to the development of Arabic poetry, history testifies that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) recited the poems of the poet Twarfa of the time of ignorance. The widespread dissemination of the Qur'an and Hadith caused considerable damage to poetry, but it was later revived. Al-Hira the fourth son of King Murji preserved some poems written in praise of Nu'man III during his reign. Among such poems is 'Saba Muallaqa'.

There was no collection of poetry during the Jahili period, but across the Islamic period, a group of narrators appeared in the late Umayyad and early Abbasid periods who achieved considerable prominence in poetry. Most of them were the inhabitants of Basra and Kufa. As a result, poetry centres were established in both these places. They recited poetry as well as history and war events. Prominent among the narrators of Basra are Abu Amr ibn Ola and Kufar Hammad al-Bariya. The famous Arabic grammarian Asma'i and

⁴ Shahidullah, Dr. Mohammad. Arabi Shahityer Itibritya. P. 118- 129. Kolkata, 1977.

the famous poet Ashwaybani pioneered the collection of poetry of the Jahili era. Not thinking enough of hearing from previous narrators, they went to the real environment and examined the poems themselves and included them in their poems. Hisham bin Muhammad al-Kalbi compiled 140 poems. Shaybani collected poems from about 80 tribes and recited them among the people in the mosques of Kufa and thus, in the 3rd AH, Abu Tammam's 'Al-Hamasa,' Jahiz's 'Al-Bayan wa al-Tibayin.' Kamil's 'Uyunul Akhbar' and Ibn Qutaybar's 'Al-Sher wa al-Shuara' etc. In the fourth century AH, Abul Farz al-Isfa-Hani compiled a detailed and noteworthy book of poetry, Kitab al-Agani.⁵

Conclusion:

After a close study on the topic, it is found that the emergence and growth of Arabic poetry during the pre-Islamic era mirrors the mental and emotional existence of Arab societies prior to Islam's advent. Grounded in spoken traditions, poetry functioned as the shared remembrance and moral compass of Arab communities, articulating their values of courage, honour, romance, and clan devotion. The ancient poets, referred to as shu'arā' al-jāhiliyyah, documented their lived experiences through articulate and melodic compositions that portrayed both the splendour of nomadic existence and the brutal challenges of endurance. Through the maturation of poetic structures like the Qasida, Arabic verse achieved extraordinary refinement in expression, symbolism, and organization. The poets' command of meter and figurative language demonstrated not only their creative brilliance but also established the groundwork for subsequent Arabic literary accomplishments. Pre-Islamic verse therefore represents an essential cultural record that connects the spoken heritage with the documented tradition of Islamic writing. It captures the Arabian character – its honor, courage, and artistic appreciation – and remains celebrated for its verbal excellence and enduring emotional resonance, establishing the foundation of one of humanity's most lasting literary legacies. In short, the emergence and evolution of Arabic poetry during the pre-Islamic era demonstrate the profound cultural and emotional depth of ancient Arab society. Originating from spoken tradition, poetry functioned as a chronicle of tribal principles, bravery, romance, and communal practices. The qasida structure, characterized by its refined language and striking descriptions, embodied both creative mastery and ethical standards. Poets were considered representatives and record-keepers of their communities. This literary form established the groundwork for subsequent Arabic writings, maintaining the language's authenticity and Arabia's cultural essence. Therefore, pre-Islamic poetry continues to represent an enduring manifestation of Arab heritage and creative achievement.

References:

1. Dewan, Alom Hussain. *Arabi Sahityaor somu Buronji*, Nagaon, 2002.
2. Dr. Shahidullah, Mohammad. *Arabi Shahityer Itibritya*, Kolkata, 1977.
3. Hitti, P.K. *Arab Zahir Itihas*, Kolkata, 1999
4. Hitti, P.K. *History of the Arabs*, Macmillan Education UK, 1970.
5. Nadwi, Abdul Haleem. *Arabi Adab ki Tarikh*, New Delhi, 1979.
6. Nadwi, Rabi Hasan. *Tarikh al- Adab al- Arabi*, Lukhnow., 1989.
7. Nicholson, R. A. *A Literary History of the Arabs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962.

⁵ Hitti, P.K. Arab Zahir Itihas. P-98- 100, Kolkata, 1999.