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**Arabic Poetry of Depression and Anxiety  
in Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Days**

Poetry usually tells much of the life and the different feelings of the poet in different situations. It reflects his state of joy and happiness as well as his fears, nervousness, worries and sadness.

The phenomenon of anxiety, worry, depression and gloominess is often a characteristic of some of the early, particularly pre-Islamic Arabic poetry. There were many causes for such feelings: continuous tribal wars, loss of a brother, a son, a husband etc., hard life and poverty, love and disappointment or failure in love, old age and frailty, being disowned by the tribe and left as an outcast with no tribal protection, as well as many other things.

Generally speaking, pre-Islamic poetry is characterized by being a natural reflection of the genuine feelings of the individual poet. He lives his life, suffers from misfortunate incidents, falls in love, meets disappointment, suffers from the hardships of life, from fatigue, hunger, fear and other misfortunes. Naturally, he reflects on his responsibilities towards himself, his family, his tribe, joins raids against other tribes, admires bravery and generosity of his fellow tribesmen as well as others. He also reflects on nature around him, and admires beauty when he is endowed with some sensitive feelings. His poetry is then a reflection to all this. He utters verses spontaneously as some talk to others or to themselves, that is naturally, describing his feelings and experiences. Apart from some professional poets, his poetry comes natural, springing from true, and not artificial feelings. If he praises his fellow tribesman for his generosity or bravery shown in battle, or laments his death, he is often describing his own genuine emotions and feelings. Pre-Islamic and early Islamic poetry, it can be said, is often the reflection of some experiences and effects on the poet, sincerely expressed in his poetic utterance. It is characterized by realism, sensitivity marred often by pessimism towards life, and often showing his admiration of beauty in nature.

Apart from the traditional themes in the pre-Islamic and early Islamic poetry, there are in the collections, like *Al-Ḥamāsa* of Abū Tammām, short and genuine poems said spontaneously as a reaction to individual experiences of the poet while facing the hardships of life, particularly in the

desert. A careful examination of poetry in the collections like *Al-Ḥamāsa*, the *Al-Mu‘allaqāt* and the different *dīwāns* of poets, shows that depression. Worries, gloominess, fear, frustration, hopelessness and melancholy are often explicit therein. Examples are in plenty. We sometimes notice such depressive feelings even in the Odes (*Al-Mu‘allaqāt*) and other long poems and poetry of tribal wars of the time. When Imru’ al-Qays was leading a comfortable, irresponsible life of a prince, as son of Ḥuḡr, the Kindite monarch, his poetry reflected the life of a young irresponsible man addicted to wine and women. In his ode he says:

ألا رب يوم لك منهن صالح      ولا سيما يوم بدارة جلجل  
ويوم عقرت للعداري مطيبي      فيا عجا من كورها المتحمل  
فظل العداري يرتمين بلحمها      وشحم كهذاب الدمقس المقتل  
ويوم دخلت الخدر خدر عنيزة      فقالت لك الويلات انك مرجلي

When, at the murder of his father by the rebellious Banū Asad, he faced his responsibilities to avenge his father's death, his poetry took another course, according to the seriousness of the new situation. Wine and women are no more mentioned in his poems, but war and retaliation. Transmitters quote him as saying when he heard the news of his father's tragic fate:

لا صحو اليوم ولا سكر غدا      اليوم خمر و غدا أمر

He vowed to avenge his father's death and finally sought help from the Byzantine Caesar in Constantinople, but he died on the way back. Of his worries he says:

بكي صاحبي لما رأى الدرب دونه      وأيقن أنا لاحقان بقيصرا  
فقلت له لا تبك عينك انما      نحاول ملكا أو نموت فنقبرا

All this is springing from genuine feelings.

Even in love poetry, the poet often expresses his suffering from the love he is in or from the memory of his old love as in these verses:

هل الحب الا زفرة بعد زفرة ؟    و حر على الأحشاء ليس له برد ؟  
 وفيض دموع العين يا مي كلما    بدا علم من أرضكم لم يكن يبدو  
 فان ذكرت فاضت من العين عبرة    على لحيتي نثر الجمان من العقد

The tone of suffering and depression is noticed clearly here: at remembering Mayy, his love, he is weeping and the tears are dropping on his beard like pearls!

Another, Aṣ-Ṣimma al-Quṣayrī, seems to rejoice at being in love with Rayya, but he is suffering because her father has refused to give her in marriage to him:

حننت الى ريا و نفسك باعدت    مزارك من ريا وشعبا كما معا  
 بكت عينك اليسرى فلما زجرتها عن الجهل بعد الحلم أسبلتا معا  
 وأذكر أيام الحمى ثم أثني    على كبدي من خشية أن تصدعا

(*Al-Hamāsa* II, p. 87)

He is here yearning for Rayya but he is rebuking himself for his impatience and inability to forget her; crying. and feeling that his liver is going to break whenever she crosses his mind.

In his *Hamāsa*, Abū Tammām collects more than a hundred short poems of love and suffering from love, and these quotations are only examples reflecting this sadness and suffering from love and failure in it.

One of the causes of depression, sadness and worry from which the poet suffered was the loss of a dear relative through raid, or aggression and the duty of revenge against the aggressor. Many poems preserved, reveal this fact. One poet lost a close relative named 'Addā', and said mourning him:

أعداء ! ما للعيش بعدك لذة    ولا لخليل بهجة بخليل

and the verse shows that the poet like others, feels sorrow smiting his heart at this irrecoverable loss.

Another, Ibn 'Anma of Ḍabba, mourns the death of the famous pre-Islamic *sayyid* and warrior Bistām Ibn Qays of Banū Ṣaybān killed treacherously in a tribal clash, saying:

لأُم الأرض ويل ما أجت      بحيث أضر بالحسن السبيل ؟  
 نقسم ماله فينا وندعو      أبا الصهباء اذ جنح الأصيل  
 أجلك لا تراه و لن تراه      تحب به عذافرة ذمول ؟  
 أفاتته بنو زيد بن عمرو      ولا يوفى ببسطام قتيل  
 وخر على الألاء لم يوسد      كأن جبينه سيف صقيل  
 (Al-Ḥamāsa I, p. 591)

When Labīd Ibn Rabī‘a lost his brother Arbad, he mourned him saying in one of his *marāṭī* poems (elegies):

ذهب الذين يعاش في أكنافهم      وبقيت في خلف كجلد الأجر  
 يا أربد الخير الكريم حدوده      غادرتني أمشي بقرن أعضب  
 ان الرزية لا رزية مثلها      فقدان كل أخ كضوء الكوكب  
 (Al-Mubarrad, *Al-Kāmil* IV, p. 33)

Durayd Ibn aṣ-Ṣimma of Hawāzin. who had also lost his brother in a clash with Ġaṭafān is lamenting this loss of a dear brother in this well-known elegy beginning with:

نصحت لعارض وأصحاب عارض ورهط بني السوداء و القوم شهدي  
 (Al-Ḥamāsa I, p. 473)

Here he is obviously crying (the picturesque descriptions in the lines to be noticed):

تنادوا فقالوا: أردت الخيل فارسا      فقلت: أعبد الله ذلكم الردي ؟  
 فجئت إليه و الرماح تنوشه      كوقع الصياصي في النسيج الممدد  
 وكنت كذات البو ريعت فأقبلت      الى جلد من مسك سقب مقدد

His relief, as he says, comes from doing his best in an attempt to save

his brother who was then surrounded by enemy fighters :

فطاعنت عنه الخيل حتى تنفست    وحتى علاني حالك اللون أسود  
قتال امرئ آسى أخاه بنفسه    ويعلم أن المرء غير مـخلد

He is well-aware while fighting that man is not immortal and will finally die in one way or other as he says in the last quoted verse.

Another, Ḥurayṭ Ibn Zayd al-Ḥayl of Ṭayyi', who had lost his uncle, laments him and, seeing the diseased's daughter Umm Aws mourning impatiently, tries to comfort her saying the same about the inevitable approach of death, smiting both the rich and the poor without discrimination:

فلا تجزعي يا أم أوس فانه    تصيب المنيا كل حاف وذى نعل  
ولولا الأسى ما عشت في الناس ساعة    ولكن اذا ما شئت جاوبني مثلي  
(*Al-Ḥamāsa* I, no. 15, p. 492)

Sometimes the poet expresses his sorrow at the loss of his fellow tribesmen who have fallen in clashes between factions of the same tribe, his own tribe, and therefore those fallen tribesmen are a real loss to the tribe:

كفى حزنا أن لا أزال أرى القنا    تمج نجيعا من ذراعي و من عضدي  
ظللت أسامي الموت اخوتي الألى    أبوهم أبي عند المراحة و الجد

The famous pre-Islamic *ṣu'lūk* Ta'abbata Šarran lost a close relative killed by an enemy, mourned the dead and promised to avenge his death, which thing made him worried:

ان بالشعب الذي دون سلع    لقتيلا دمه ما يطل  
خلف العبء علي و لى    أنا بالعبء له مستقل

(*Al-Ḥamāsa* I, p. 481)

while another laments his loss of some brothers but sees it better to be patient though patience in this case is hard:

بقية اخوان أتى الدهر دونهم فما جزعي ؟ أم كيف عنهم تجلدي ؟  
(Ibid., p. 627)

Hard life worried people to such an extent that one father expressed his wish his daughter Umayma died so as not to face poverty he suffered from:

لولا أميمة لم أجزع من العدم ولم أقاس الدجى في حندس الظلم  
تهوى حياتي و أهوى موتها شفقاً والموت أكرم نزال على الحرم  
(Ibid., p. 153)

Another poet, Ḥiṭṭān Ibn al-Mu‘alla, also suffering from hard life and anxious about the fate of his young daughters, says:

من شامخ عال الى خفض	أنزلي الدهر على حكمه
فليس لي مال سوى عرضي	وغالبني الدهر بوفر الغنى
أضحكني الدهر بما يرضي	أبكاني الدهر ويا ربما
رددت من بعض الى بعض	لولا بنيات كرجب القطا
في الأرض ذات الطول والعرض	لكان لي مضطرب واسع

(Ibid., p. 154)

Women also had their share in poetry of lamentation. A woman who had lost her husband mourns him and promised never to bathe and never to cease weeping:

آليت لا تنفك عيني حزينة عليك ولا ينفك جلدي أغبرا  
(Ibid., p. 646)

Another woman does not believe that she has lost her husband and hopes, though falsely, to see him again:

تأوب عيني نصبها و اكتئابها و رجيت نفسا راث عنها اياها

أعلل نفسي بالمرجم غيبه      وكاذبتها حتى أبان كذاها

In this connection the well-known Al-Hansā' should be mentioned mourning her brothers Mu'āwiya and Ṣaḥr, both killed in tribal feuds, in very impressive poems. She says mourning Ṣaḥr, who had died from his wounds in battle after long suffering:

فلولا كثرة الباكين حولي      على اخوانهم لقتلت نفسي  
وما ييكون مثل أخي ولكن      أعزي النفس عنه بالتأسي  
يذكرني طلوع الشمس صحرا      وأذكره لكل غروب شمس

(Al-Mubarrad, *Al-Kāmil* I, p. 14)

She is so frustrated and distressed that she would kill herself out of sorrow had she not found consolation in the suffering of other women of the tribe stricken by the death of their brothers.

These are examples of some causes for the worry and depression experienced then and the poetry said spontaneously perhaps as a genuine reaction. is a reflection to this state of mind.

Bedouins usually face a hard life in the desert but they accept it and are accustomed to it. They also face among other hardships, a continuous readiness to go to war against other tribes, a continuous fear of raids led by enemy tribes, and a continuous expectation of loss of relatives and fellow tribesmen in these clashes and raids. Such fears are often expressed in their poetry by their poets who were often the spokesmen of their tribes. They praise bravery and despise cowardice, reflecting on death as a reality which befalls everybody in war or in bed; and therefore one should face this reality bravely and remember not run away particularly in war:

ونغشى فنغشى ثم نرمي فنرتمي      ونضرب ضربا ليس فيه تواني

says one poet, while another confirms bravery in battle:

إذا خام أقوام تقحمت غمرة      يهاب حمياها الألد المداعس

and expresses death as an end either on the battlefield or on bed, more clearly saying:

ألم تر أن المرء رهن منية صريع لعافي الطير أو سوف يرمس

In these lines the poet is sure that death is finally coming and therefore he should face the enemy bravely in the battle. He is keen not to tarnish his honour with a cowardly or any other behaviour that is not honorable.

Depression, worry, anxiety and fear characterize the life and poetry of a group of Bedouins called *ša'ālīk* (pl. of *šu'lūk*) in particular. This tribesman. *šu'lūk*. was usually an outcast, repudiated or disowned by his tribe and driven away for certain reason; so he used to wander from one place to another throughout the rest of his life.

This caste of tribesmen can be divided into two or three groups. There were those individuals in the tribe, like the famous 'Antara of 'Abs and Aš-Šanfarà of Azd, who were remarkable for their warlike achievements in their tribes and had pride and dignity but, as they were not *ašrāf* in descent, did not receive the tribal position they claimed and regarded themselves as eligible for, and therefore revolted against this discrimination. There was also another group of the tribe who were often disowned by their tribe for their unacceptable actions and forced to leave the tribe, thus losing the advantage of the traditional collective tribal protection then prevailing in the Bedouin society. Such a tribesman was called *hālī*.

The *ša'ālīk* found in the spacious extensive Arabian desert the freedom to move and do whatever they liked, to raid, attack those regarded by them as enemy, particularly the rich, and to express in an impressive poetry their different feelings and suffering: in short. living their present day and being sure that the morning might not come to them.

While 'Antara was later approached by the *ašrāf*, the notables, of his tribe 'Abs, being their saviour in hard times as he had proved to be, and his position restored in the tribe. Aš-Šanfarà continued to be an outcast, and his poems, his *Lāmiyya* in particular, reveal his self-pride, his indignation, his sufferings and his despair:

أقيموا بني أمي صدور مطيكم فاني الى قوم سواكم لأميل  
فقد حمت الحاجات و الليل مقمر وشدت لطيات مطايا وأرجل  
وفي الأرض منأى للكريم عن الأذى وفيها لمن خاف القلى متعزل

Here Aš-Šanfarà reveals his disapproval of his tribal relations with his own tribesmen for their unfavorable attitude towards him, which made him leave the tribe, preferring to face and confront whatever hardships he might



meet outside the tribe's domain and this is often because of the unacceptable attitude towards him and the pride he takes in himself.

Men with honour and pride like Aš-Šanfarà suffered from humiliation inside their tribes, revolted against this attitude and left to take refuge in the desert where they felt themselves free in action and expression. But this was not without risks. They had no more the tribal protection they had enjoyed within their tribes. They could face fear, hunger and danger of being attacked by others. They find themselves with no other alternative but to indulge in raids, loafing and theft to make a living. Through their experiences and facing the hardships of life they unscrupulously kill and loot; but they often share their booty with others who are in similar situation and need. This is expressed by one of these *ša'ālīk*:

إذا ما غنمنا مغنما كان قسمة ولم نتبع رأي الشحيح المتارك  
(Al-Balāḍurī, *Ansāb al-Ašrāf* V, p. 292 )

They suffered from (and accepted) hunger and poverty hoping of a better turn of luck:

إذا جاع لم يفرح بأكلة ساعة ولم يبتس من فقدتها وهو ساغب  
يرى أن بعد العسر يسرا ولا يرى إذا كان يسرا أنه الدهر لازب

In the following verses, the poet is always worried and afraid like the animals of the desert: unable to enjoy an easy comfortable sleep but always ready to jump and run away for safety at any sound. sleeping with one eye opened as he says:

ينام باحدى مقلتيه ويتقي المنايا بأخرى ، فهو يقظان نائم  
and:

ويجعل عينيه ريثة قلبه الى سلة من حد أحضر باتك

says another.

One *šu'lūk* poet philosophizes his situation saying that poverty, hard times, difficulty and distress are temporary like prosperity and easy time and human beings will finally die:

والعسر كاليسر والغنى كالعدم و الحى للمنون

Another confirms this in a state of despair while longing for a settled, more convenient life:

ان الأمور اذا انسدت مسالكها فالصبر يفتق منها كل ما رتجا  
و لا يغرنك صفو أنت شاربه فرما كان بالتكدير ممتزجا

while another is more optimistic :

و كل شديدة نزلت بقوم سيأتي بعد شدتها رخاء

He hopes for a turn of fortune while admitting that worries also come from man's endless needs. saying:

نروح ونغدو لحاجاتنا وحاجة من عاش لا تنقضي  
ويسلبه الموت أثوابه ويمنعه الموت ما يشتهي

But despite his needs which often make his life intolerable, he is optimistic and hopeful that an easy life may follow hardships. In both situations he boasts that he always keeps his honour clean; he unlike others. never forgot to help those who were in need:

وأعسر أحيانا فتشتد عسرتي وأدرك ميسور الغنى ومعى عرضي  
وأبذل معروفى و تصفو خليلي اذا كدرت أخلاق كل فتى محض

Fortune and wealth come and go and they are often not of man's making; but honour and good name should always be kept, he says:

وكائن رأينا من غنى مذمم وصعلوك قوم مات وهو حميد  
وليس الغنى و الفقر من حيلة الفتى ولكن أحاط قسمت و جدود

His worries and anxiety often spring from his raids and activities against others; his enemies are therefore everywhere in the desert looking

for him for retaliation, so that he hardly finds a safe place to shelter him or hide him from his enemies; he says:

كأن بلاد الله و هي عريضة على الخائف المطلوب كفة حابل

and in another verse:

دوي الفيافي رابه فكأنه أميم وساري الليل سوف يعود

These *ṣa'ālīk* lived in the Al-Ḥiḡāz mountains, in the wasteland, in the boundless desert, believing that might is right and that there is no way to survive other than to loaf, to raid and plunder in order to get their livelihood and support their life.

One of these was the *ṣu'lūk* poet Sāriya Ibn Zunaym of Du'il of Kināna (Ibn Ḥaḡar, *Iṣāba*, 3034). Sayf Ibn 'Umar and Al-Wāqidi say that Sāriya was:

كان (سارية بن زنيم) كثير الغارة و كان في الجاهلية خليعا (أي لصا) و كان يسبق الخيل عدوا على رجله. ثم أسلم وحسن اسلامه وأمره عمر على الجيش الذي فتح أصبهان.

That is, he used to raid very frequently, he was a *ḥali*, and if he raced with a horse, he outran the horse. Then he embraced Islam and proved to be a good Muslim and therefore 'Umar I made him the leader of the army which conquered Iṣfahān.

Raiding was a necessity for these *ṣa'ālīk* for life and livelihood; but death was also expected and worried them. So while still living they as well as others, had to find ways of joy and enjoyment; and this was in visiting wine-shops or taverns, drinking and enjoying the company of women provided there. This is often reflected in their poetry. Ṭarafa Ibn al-'Abd, for example, says in his *Mu'allaqa*:

ألا أيهاذا الزاجري أحضر الوغى وأن أشهد اللذات، هل أنت مخلدي؟  
فان كنت لا تستطيع دفع منيتي فدعني أبادرها بما ملكت يدي

Some poets suffer from old age and the frailty he feels because of old age. Zuhayr Ibn Abī Sulmā says:

سئمت تكاليف الحياة، و من يعيش ثمانين حولا لا أبا لك يسأم

He at this age finds tribal wars futile and cruel especially if it is waged for insignificant causes, like that between the two Ġaṭafāni tribes, ‘Abs and Ḍibyān. He is worried and even distressed at the disastrous toll of this war and while condemning it, praises those who ended it at their own cost:

وما الحرب الا ما علمتم وذقتم      وما هو عنها بالحديث المرحم متى  
تبعثوها تبعثوها ذميمة      وتضر اذا ضريرتموها فتضرم

One of the tribal *aṣrāf*, named Al-Ḥārīt Ibn ‘Abbād attempted to make peace between the tribes of Bakr and Taḡlib after the murder of Kulayb by Ġassās. He sent his own son Buḡayr to Taḡlib to be killed for Kulayb and so to end the war. Taḡlib killed the boy but did not stop the war. This enraged the father; he uttered verses full of fury and sadness at the futile murder of the boy. The poem begins with this verse:

قربا مربط النعامة مني      قرباها و قربا سربالي  
لم أكن من جناحها علم الله      واني لحرها اليوم صالي  
(Ibn al-Aṭīr, *Al-Kāmil* I, p. 364)

This tragic incident made him change his neutrality and enter the war against Taḡlib, and this helped in their defeat later. He says:

يا بجير الخيرات لا صلح حتى      تملأ اليد من رؤوس الرجال  
قتلوه بشسع نعل كليب      ان قتل الكريم بالشسع غالي

The poem expresses his disappointment at the failure of his peaceful initiative and his attempt to participate in the war against Taḡlib with a decision not to make peace with them before killing very many of their men. It also expresses his sorrow and frustration, blaming himself for that peace initiative.

The chapter in Ibn al-Aṭīr's history (*Al-Kāmil*, volume I) on *Ayyām al-‘Arab* is full of such poetry said in the tribal wars and retaliation reflecting sadness and worries at the casualties fallen in battle.

One significant incident is that of the fate of one Yemeni chief, ‘Abd Yāḡūt al-Ḥārītī, captured in a battle between his tribe Maḍhiḡ and Tamīm. He was a poet and so Tamīm, before killing him, tied his tongue so as to

prevent him from saying poetry against them. During the night, an old Tamīmi woman took pity on him and released his tongue; so he said this well-known poem beginning with:

ألا لا تلوماني كفى اللوم ما بيا      فما لكما في اللوم نفع و لا ليا

He says in a long poem lamenting himself:

أقول وقد شدوا لساني بنسعة      معاشر قوم أطلقوا من لساني  
فان تقتلونني تقتلوا بي سيدا      وان تطلقوني تحربوني ماليا

and goes back in memory to the old days when he enjoyed life and fought bravely which denotes his stress. Nervousness, regret and frustration before he was put to death.

Well known warriors often found themselves chased by their enemies for revenge. Ṭarīf of Tamīm, who had killed in battle some Šaybānī men and others from different tribes, found himself sought at *sūq* 'Ukāz for revenge even during the pilgrimage season. He had noticed the Šaybānī and other tribesmen at that *sūq* watching him there and said:

أوكلما وردت عكاظ قبيلة      بعثوا الي عريفهم يتوسم ؟

(Ibn al-Aṭīr, *Al-Kāmil* I, p. 450)

The tone of anxiety and worry is obvious in this verse.

Life of loneliness in the desert filled the Bedouins including their poets with feelings of melancholy and anxiety. It also filled their imagination with supernatural creatures like *jinn* which they often feared and this was reflected in their poetry in different expressions like: جنة، مجنة، جنية جن،. One of them says:

ويحك يا جني ! هل بدا لك      أن ترجعي عقلي فقد أنى لك ؟

Many stories about the *jinn* and those Bedouins confronting them are related in *Aḡānī*, *ʿUyūn al-aḥbār*, and other classical sources often showing this worry.

With the emergence of the conflict over the Caliphate following the death of Caliph ʿUṭmān, poetry of depression and sadness flourished. The new rebels are not the *šaʿālīk* but those who opposed the Umayyad regime,

the Ḥawāriḡ in particular. Much blood was shed and aggressive, despotic rule was followed to force submission to the Umayyads. Poetry reflecting the bravery, despair and sadness of the rebellious Ḥawāriḡ and others can be read in the third volume of *Al-Kāmil* of Al-Mubarrad.

A Ḥāriḡite describes with much distress and despair how another Ḥāriḡite fought bravely but finally met his fate in the battle saying:

يهوي و ترفعه الرماح كأنه      شلو تنشب في مخالب ضاري  
فتوى صريعا و الرماح تنوشه      ان الشراة قصيرة الأعمار

(Al-Mubarrad, op. cit., III, p. 412; again, the picturesque description in these lines is to be noticed.)

Another vows to fight the enemy to avenge the death of his comrade Ḥurqūṣ until he dies and meet him in Paradise:

وأسأل الله بيع النفس محتسبا حتى ألاقي في الفردوس حرقوصا  
(Ibid., 262)

Pre-Islamic poetry in particular can be seen from this view as a true expression of experiences of joy or sadness certain tribesmen passed through and recorded these experiences and the feelings accompanied these experiences in verse, expressive and full of metaphors, often in poems long or short sometimes even not exceeding few lines, but genuine pre-Islamic and genuine Islamic poetry.