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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 diwāns 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 Ḥuğr, the Kindite monarch, his poetry reflected the life of a young irresponsible man addicted to wine and women. In his ode he says:

لا صحو اليوم ولا سكر غدا اليوم حمر 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:

بكى صاحبي لما رأى الدرك دونه وأبكي أنا لاحقان بقيضوا

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:
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-Qušayrī, 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:

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 Ḥamāsa, 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:

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

Another, Ibn ‘Anma of Dabba, mourns the death of the famous pre-Islamic sayyid and warrior Bistām Ibn Qays of Banū Šaybān killed treacherously in a tribal clash, saying:
When Labid Ibn Rabʿa lost his brother Arbad, he mourned him saying in one of his marāṭi poems (elegies):

(Al-Hamāṣa I, p. 591)

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

(Al-Hamāṣa I, p. 473)

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

His relief, as he says, comes from doing his best in an attempt to save
his brother who was then surrounded by enemy fighters:

فطاعت عنه الخيل حتى تنفست وحين علاني حالك اللون أسود
فتعل أمرى آسي أهله بنفسه ويعلم أن السмер غير مخلد

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, Ħurayṭ Ibn Zayd al-Ḥayl of Ta‘yi‘, 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 المنايا كل حاف وذي نعل
ولولا الناس ما عشت في الناس ساعة ولكن اذا ما شئت حاوبي مثلي

(Al-Hamāṣa 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 تمح نجعا من ذراعي و من عضدي
ظلت أسامي الموت اخوتي الأول أبوهم أبي عند المروة و الجد

The famous pre-Islamic su‘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 لفتيل دمه ما يطل
خلف العبء علي و لسأ أنا بالعبء له مستقبل

(Al-Hamāṣa 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:
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 أميّتة لم أجزع من العدم ولم أقسم الدحي في جنّة الظلم
قوى حياتي وأهوى موقدا شفقا والموت آكروم نزال على المحرم

(Ibid., p. 153)

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

أنزلني الدهر على حكمة
وغلبي الدهر بوفر الغين
أضحكني الدهر بما يرضي
ردت من بعض إلى بعض
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:

 آلية لا تنفك عيني حزينة
عليك ولا تنفك جلدي أغبر

(Ibid., p. 646)

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

تأوب عيني نصيحتها وأكثراها
و رجبت نفسا راث عنها اياها
In this connection the well-known Al-Ḥansāʾ should be mentioned mourning her brothers Muʿāwiya and Ṣāḥr, both killed in tribal feuds, in very impressive poems. She says mourning Ṣāḥr, who had died from his wounds in battle after long suffering:

(...)

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:

(...)

and expresses death as an end either on the battlefield or on bed, more clearly saying:
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 and fear characterize the life and poetry of a group of Bedouins called sa‘ālik (pl. of su‘lūk) in particular. This tribesman, su‘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-Šanfarā 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 bali‘.

The sa‘ālik 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-Šanfarā continued to be an outcast, and his poems, his Lāmiyya in particular, reveal his self-pride, his indignation, his sufferings and his despair:

Here Aš-Šanfarā 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 ṣa‘ālīk:

\[\text{ اذا ما غنمنا مغنمًا كان قسمًا و لم تنبأ رأي الشحيم المترك} \]

(Al-Balāḏurī, Ansāb al-Asrāf V, p. 292)

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

\[\text{ اذا جاع لم يفرح بأكلة ساعة ولم يبتئس من فقدها وهو ساءب يرى أن بعد العصر يسرا ولا يرى إذا كان يسرا أنه الدهر لازم} \]

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:

\[\text{ ينام بحادى مقلتيه ويتقي المنايا بأخرى ، فهو يقطن نائم} \]

and:

\[\text{ ويجعل عينيه ريبة قلبه الى سللة من حد أحضر باتك} \]

says another.

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

while another is more optimistic:

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

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:

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:

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:

كَانُ بَلَادُ اللَّهِ وَهِيَ عَريضة عَلَى الْخَائِفِ المَطلُوب كَفَةٌ حَابل

and in another verse:

دُوي القبائِي رَابِهٔ فَكَانَهُ أميِم وساري الليل سوف يعود

These *sa‘ālik* lived in the Al-Hijāz 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 *su‘lūk* poet Sāriya Ibn Zunaym of Du‘il of Kināna (Ibn Ḥaḡar, *Iṣāba*, 3034). Sayf Ibn ‘Umar and Al-Wāqidī say that Sāriya was:

كَانَ (سَاريةَ بِن زَنيم) كُثيرُ الغَارَةِ وَكَانَ في الجَاهِلَيْة خَليعاً (أَي لَصَاء) وَكَانُ يَسبِقُ الْخِيلَ عَدْواً عَلَى رَجْلِهِ. ثُمَّ أَسْلَمَ وحُسَنَ اسْتِلَامَهُ وَأَمَّرَ عَمَّرَ عَلَى الجَيْشِ الَّذِي فَتَحَ أَشْبِهَانَ.

That is, he used to raid very frequently, he was a *ḥali‘*, and if he raced with a horse, he outrun 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 Isfahān.

Raiding was a necessity for these *sa‘ālik* 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. Ṭarāfā Ibn al-‘Abd, for example, says in his *Mu’allaqa*:

أَلا أَبِيَّا مَا الزَّارِجِي أَحْضَر الوَّغَيْر ْوَأَنْ أَشْهَدُ اللَّنَاتِ، هَلْ أَنتَ مَخْلِدٌ؟ فَانْكَتَ لا تَسْطِيعُ دَعْعُ مَنِيي ْفَدْعَيْنِي أَبْدَرْهَا بَما مَلْكَتُ يَدِي

Some poets suffer from old age and the frailty he feels because of old age. Zuhayr Ibn Abī Sulmā says:
He at this age finds tribal wars futile and cruel especially if it is waged for insignificant causes, like that between the two Ġatafānī tribes, ‘Abs and Ḥūyān. 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:

وَما هَوَّا عَنْهَا بِالْحَدِيثِ الْمُرْجَمِ مِنَ تَبِعُوهَا تَبِعُوهَا ذِيْمَةً وَتَضَرُّ إِذَا ضَرَّتْ مَوْهَا فَتَضَرُّ مَوْهَا

One of the tribal ašrāf, named Al-Ḥāriṭ Ibn ‘Abbād attempted to make peace between the tribes of Bakr and Tağlīb after the murder of Kulayb by Qassās. He sent his own son Buqayr to Tağlīb to be killed for Kulayb and so to end the war. Tağlīb 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:

قرِبَا وَقِرْبَا سِرْبَلْيِ
لمَّ أَكُنَّ مِنْ جَنَاةٍ عَلْمَ اللَّهِ
(Ibn al-Aṭīr, Al-Kāmil I, p. 364)

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

يا بِجَبَرُ الْحُبُّ العَالِٰٓي يَنْصُرُ الْحَرَّاءَ الْمَرْحُومَةَ
فتِنُوهَا فَيْتِنُوهَا كَلِبٌ

The poem expresses his disappointment at the failure of his peaceful initiative and his attempt to participate in the war against Tağlīb 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 Yāğūṯ al-Ḥāriṭī, captured in a battle between his tribe Maḥḥiğ 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:

\[
\text{اَلَّا لَا تَلْوِمْنِي كَنَّى الْلُوءَ مَا بِي فَمَا لَكَمَا في اللُوءَ نَفَعَ وَلَا لِي}
\]

He says in a long poem lamenting himself:

\[
\text{اَقْوَلُ وَقَدْ شَدَّوا لَسَانِي بِنَسْعَةٍ مَعَاشِرُ قَوْمٍ أُطْلَقْوَانِ مِنْ لَسَانِي فَانْتَقِلْنِي تَقْتِلْوَي سَيِّدَانًا وَانْتَقِلْنِي تَقْتِلْوَي مَالِيَّانَ}
\]

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 ṣūq ʿUkāz for revenge even during the pilgrimage season. He had noticed the Šaybānī and other tribesmen at that ṣūq watching him there and said:

\[
\text{أَوْ كَلَّمَهَا وَرَدَتْ عَكَاظٌ قِبْلَةٌ بَعْثَعاَ بِإِلَى عَرْيَفِهِمْ يَتَوَسُّمُ؟}
\]

(Ibn al-Aṣfir, 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 jīn which they often feared and this was reflected in their poetry in different expressions like: جَنَّة، جَنَّة، جِنَّة، جَيْنَة. One of them says:

\[
\text{وَيَكُمْ يَا جَيْنُ! هِلْ بَداً لَكَ أَنْ تَرْجِعِي عَقْلِي فَقَدْ أَنْ لَكَ؟}
\]

Many stories about the jīn and those Bedouins confronting them are related in Aḡānī, ʿUyūn al-abbār, 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 šāʿālik but those who opposed the Umayyad regime,
the Ḥawārīg 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 Ḥawārīg and others can be read in the third volume of Al-Kāmil of Al-Mubarrad.

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

بيهوي و ترفعه الرماح كـ كـالله شهو يندب في خالب ضار
فتي犹如 و الرماح تنشب كـ الآمال إن الشراء قصرة الأعـمار

(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 Hurqūs until he dies and meet him in Paradise:

واسأل الله بائع النفس محسبا حيي ألافي في الفردوس حرفوـصا

(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.