



PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIC PROSE LITERATURE & ITS GROWTH

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ABSTRACT

The pre Islamic prose literature based upon genealogy, history and polite and elegant literature comprising of proverbs, maxims, stories, legends and descriptions. The language of the pre Islamic prose literature was mutually corresponded with its own themes. Pre-literature societies, by definition, have no written literature, but may possess rich and varied oral traditions such as folk, folklore and folk songs that effectively constitute an oral literature. Literate societies may continue an oral tradition – particularly within family (for example...bed time stories) or informal social structures. The purpose of the paper is to show the remarkable growth of Arabic Prose Literature during the pre-Islamic period.

KEY WORDS: Literature, Prose, Islamic, Stories, Oral.

Introduction

Pre-Islamic period is generally called “Ayyame Jahilliya” (Age of Ignorance). The pre-Islamic Arabic literature preserved by oral tradition from 500 A.D. to 622 A.D. The pre-Islamic prose literature based on history, genealogy and belles or light literature consisting of stories, tales, speeches, descriptions, proverbs and maxims. And it was simple and free. It handed over to the generation by mouth to mouth¹. The telling of urban legends may be considered an example of oral literature, as can jokes². The pre-Islamic Arabic literature can be divided in two forms i.e. Prose and Poetry. The gnomic literature, consisting of Hikam collections was very high in supra-tribal level. From more primitive rhymed prose (saj’), the Arabic poems were developed in qasida form³. We have no proper historical evidence about the pre-Islamic Arabic prose literature, whether it was written or not. But we assure that during the pre-Islamic period, people used to practice Arabic prose literature. Except few, a large number of people did not read and write. They just use their memory power to preserve important one. They can memorize very long paragraph also and when it needed they can speak the entire paragraph. They kept their history and genealogy in their memory by oral transmission. There were some professionals, who preserved their national disciplines. Some other professionals gave some speeches in the market places, what they had preserved earlier⁴. During the pre-Islamic period, people from different tribes memorized their history, important incidents of the tribe and other important matters. They participated in the competitions and there they can show their talents. They used short rhyming sentences. So, we can say that during the pre-Islamic period there were some literate men and women who practiced Arabic prose literature⁵. Quss bin Saidah and Amr bin Ma’dikarib, both of them had influential activities to growth of Arabic prose literature during pre-Islamic period⁶.

Data and methodology:

The data for the study of this topic will be collected from both the primarily and secondarily sources are available in the Arabic and English literature. The method of acquiring of data will be both directly and indirectly from various universities, colleges and from various academics or public libraries. Thus this work will be based on published works research article in addition to the internet. As to follow up the methodology to complete the proposed work both descriptive and analytical method are accepted.

Ayyam Tales

The pre Islamic prose literature based upon genealogy, history and polite and elegant literature comprising of proverbs, maxims, stories, legends and descriptions. The historical literature which the pre-Islamic Arabs of Northern area was in possession of was the orally circulated narratives of the battle days of Arabs commonly known as Ayyam al-Arab. These narratives mainly dealt with wars among various contending tribes, some of them based on the tales of their deities while others depicted, to some extent, aspects of their socio-cultural and religious activities. These narratives are of ten rich in genealogical information and also mirror the characteristics features of the tribe they were concerned with. Their social behavior and religio-political outlook are also reflected in these narratives⁷. Features of Ayyam narratives are pride on purity of blood and race, social influence of a member of the tribe, his virtuous deeds in time of war and peace etc.⁸. In fact it was necessary for individual members of a tribe that they must know about the personal qualities and adventures of the former Chiefs of their tribe. For this purpose every member of the tribe was in direct touch with and had a liking for these narratives which circulated as family traditions among

them and consequently held a significant position in the social hierarchy of their tribal tribe.

Some adventures of the tribes were narrated in the form of prose stories interwoven with poetical compositions by the poet of the tribe. These verses either occur at the end of a narration or in the middle of it. Although these verses are not firmly woven in the main texture yet they are regarded as a proof of the genuineness of the narrative and make the whole story lively, lucid and effective. For such poetical compositions goes the old Arab dictum the “Poetry is the register of the deeds of the Arabs”⁹.

The language of the pre Islamic prose literature was mutually corresponded with its own themes. The diction and the style of the Ayyam narratives are quite lively, effective and self explanatory. The warp and woof of these narratives is constituted of poetical compositions with added notes is prose complementing each other. The central theme of Ayyam stories is an episode or incident or description of a certain war. The most significant and memorable incident also served the purpose of chronological demarcation. These Ayyam tales are characteristically Arabic having no signs of their being influenced by any external cultural traditions. The literature of Jahiliyya period is essentially Folk Literature in its style and characteristics and it resembles a historical version also. Ayyam al-Arab or the battle day narratives, mainly dealing with tribal conflicts, have a mixed style of prose and poetry inter-playing and inter-dependent. Each tribe had its own poet who composed the adventures and glorious deeds of his own tribe and these verses were narrated in tribal gatherings with explanatory notes in prose. Such narratives remained in circulation till the occurrence of a fresh and more significant and memorable incident; thus driving the former into oblivion. In some cases the prose versions are attached to poetical verses as explanatory notes. Since verses are easily learnt by heart, this prose narration also survived with the help of poetry. Nevertheless, possibility of new additions, interpolations and literal alterations by the transmitters of succeeding generations cannot be ruled out. It would be a fantastic approach to believe that these stories remained in circulation for centuries without any alterations. It would equally overrate the value of these narratives if we accord them the status of dependable ‘historical material’ with all implications of the term, since the legendary element has always dominated them. Those responsible for making out these narratives had no historical consciousness whatever, nor did they compose them with the purpose and intention preserving historical knowledge. Moreover, these tales are generally one sided; until and unless we have before us the narratives of both fighting tribes, it would not be possible to judge the actual role of those whom they adore as heroes. Further, they do not record and chronology and we cannot know with their help the exact or near about timing of the battles they describe. But inspire of such lacunae, we can certainly obtain from his material many useful information, and their importance as a basic source of the pre-Islamic history of the Arabs cannot be denied. Ayyam stories were also valued as social entertainment. They were considered as the collective property of the whole tribe. At first, these narratives were transmitted by the members of the tribes they described, but afterwards, professional Rawis (narrators of tribal tales) emerged, and it was during the Umayyad period that these tribal tales were committed to writing to be tales on exploited by the historiographers and philologists.

Proverbs

During the pre-Islamic period a large number of orators who used proverbs in their orations. Arabic proverb plays an important role to growth of Arabic prose

literature in pre-Islamic period. The meaning of مثل (pl. امثال) is likeness, metaphor, simile, parable, proverb, adage, example, lesson, similar case, ideal, model etc.¹⁰. Pre-Islamic poet uses proverbs in their poems. Even in the battle field poets used proverbs to encourage their soldiers. Some speakers use proverbs in their speeches to attract people attention. We can see so many interesting proverbs in pre-Islamic period. In early period proverbs transferred orally mouth to mouth only but later it was recorded in written forms. Many collectors collect proverbs from different sources and they tried to explain them in their own ways¹¹. Proverbs is the beautiful part of Arabic prose literature. Here is the example of pre-Islamic proverbs...

“Inna al-hadid bi-al-hadid yuflah”
(Nothing but iron can make impression on iron)

“Masari al-rijal tahta buruq al-tama”
(Fall of man is caused by greed)¹²

We can see a chapter of proverb in the *ab Iqd al-farid*, an encyclopedia of Ibn Abd Rabbia. He added this chapter in his encyclopedia to understand the use of proverbs. Al-Maydani (d.518/1124) collected a large number of proverbs and explained them beautifully. He formulated all the proverbs very consciously and shows the comparisons and the excellent allusions beautifully. The collection of proverbs by Mufaddal b. Salama (900 A.D.) and Maydani (1124 A.D.), which gives us very important information's of pre-Islamic period. But through the proverbs we may imagine about the lifestyle and cultural activities of pagan Arabs. Many Scholars explained proverbs in many ways. The explanation of some proverb goes far away from the original meaning. But scholars tried to find out the real meaning of the particular proverbs. Some of them success and others failed to do that. We can see the interesting meaning of the different proverbs of pre-Islamic period.

“Awfa mina l-Samaw'ali”
(More loyal than al-Samawal)

“Wafa ka-wafai l-Samawal”
(A loyalty like that of al-Samawal)

These proverbs refer to Samawal b. Adiya, an Arab of Jewish decent and Jew by religion, who lived in his castle, called al-Ablaq (The Piebald), at Tayma, some distance north of Medina. These proverbs originally related to the poet of Imru'ul-Qays¹³.

Legend & Traditions

Pre-Islamic people had strong memory power to memorize long traditions also. They had the ability to memorize and transmission of long traditions one to another. Later these traditions play an important role to growth of Arabic prose literature. Legends were also plays a vital role to growth of Arabic prose literature during the pre-Islamic period. A vast number of stories they memorized. Some of them are genuine and others were fictions. These were preserved in various literary, historical and geographical works composed under the 'Abbasid Caliphate, especially in the *kitab al-Agani* (Book of Songs) by Abu l-Faraj of Isfahan (967 A.D.). Some genuine stories based on their past heroic deeds, which they told their younger ones specially. And fiction is the interesting one which based on unreal one. There were some professional story tellers at that time. They tell interesting stories at the market places and earn money for their surviving. Later these interesting stories recorded in written documents. These helps to grow Arabic prose literature. We are no sure that during the pre-Islamic period Arabic Prose literature plays an important role but scholars agree that people of pre-Islamic period uses Arabic prose literature in different ways. At that time there was no written literature in Arabia. They explained traditions and legends in prose literature¹⁴.

The fair of Ukaz was the centre place of social, political and literary life of the Arabians. During the time of fair different people from different tribes gathered to celebrate the fair¹⁵. Many Arabians, who practiced Arabic prose literature during the time of fair of Ukaz. Some professionals tell different stories to his/her listeners. Quss bin Saidah (d. 600 A.D.) and Amr bin Madikarib (535 to 640 A.D.) were the famous orator of the pre-Islamic period. They had been orated some orations during the fair of Ukaz¹⁶.

Holy Quran

Islamic tradition relates that Muhammad received his first revelation in the Cave of Hira during one of his isolated retreats to the mountains. Thereafter, he received revelations over a period of 23 years. The Quranic verses have been divided into two parts, the verses revealed at Mecca and those revealed at Medina. But it does not mean that the verses revealed at Mecca were only sent down in Mecca, or the place of descent of the verses revealed at Medina, was only Medina. As a matter of fact, the Quranic verses were sent down at other places also. To save inconvenience the commentators have named those verses which were revealed at Mina, Hudaibiyah, Arafat and Tayef were Meccan; while the chapters revealed at Badr, Uhud and Tabuk etc. do form the part of the Quran termed as Medinian. The verses revealed at Mecca form one third part of the Quran. All these verses were revealed before the emigration. Thus, the Quran of Mecca was revealed within a period of 12 years, 5 months and 21 days till the

prophet immigrated to Medina. The rest is, 11/30 parts (21 chapters) were revealed at Medina within a period of 10 years. The verses revealed at Mecca, relate either the history of the preceding prophets or give an account of the ancient nations. During the pre-Islamic period the revelation of Quran was remarkable growth of prose literature. Beautiful and correct sentences were used in the Holy Quran. So, the people of the pre-Islamic period learnt that how to make a beautiful sentence, from the Holy Quran.

Hadith

The term *Hadith* applied to specific reports of the Prophet's words and deeds as well as those of many of the early Muslims. The *hadith* literature means the literature, which consists of narrations of the life of the Prophet and the things approved by him. During the time of the Prophet, the Companions were zealous to learn and recall his words and the incidents of his life. Many of them wrote these 'hadiths' down, and distributed them for the benefit of their co-religionists. A large number of hadiths were thus collected in the first century of Islam, and were disseminated throughout the vast Islamic empire, partly in writing, and partly as an extensive oral tradition. During the subsequent centuries, efforts were made to compile more or less exhaustive collections of hadiths which were considered to be reliable by specific scholarly criteria, and long and arduous journeys were undertaken for this purpose.

Conclusion

We can see the remarkable growth of Arabic Prose Literature during the Pre-Islamic period from the above discussion. During that period prose got an important growth in different areas. Day by day this language was improved its style. And some people who tried to write Arabic and from that practice they could write Arabic language perfectly. And some of Arabian people were started to write Arabic poetry. But in their day to day life they used to speak some stories. During pre-Islamic period there were some professional story tellers. And some people tell stories to their children during evening time. The professional story tellers tells stories and others enjoyed it. Even during early period of Islam, some Muslim people memorized so many stories. We can say that this is the impressive progress of Arabic Prose Literature. The language of pre-Islamic prose literature was very simple, sentences were small and words were easy. In some literary competition, the prose narrators were delivered their narrations in presence of prince. In their narratives they praise their kings or prince in generally. They used some rhyme words. The pre-Islamic prose literature was very simple and no hard word was used. They describe their day to day life and about their culture through prose literature. Some times they used some proverbs in their narrative. They understand how to use proverbs and how to use rhymes to make easy and natural their prose narratives¹⁷.

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