

Elegies on Father: Ma'arri and Nida Fazli

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ABSTRACT

Arabic poetry (الشعر العربي) saw dominant oscillation of blind poets, though Ma'arri was the one and without any doubt the best, especially among the poets of Abbasid period.^{1 and 2} He is the best because he attracted, as even today, due reception from the Western scholars, the oriental scholars but sadly not enough attention from the Indian scholars. Abū'l-'Alā Al-Ma'arrī (Dec 973 to May 1057) was a freethinker, philosopher who was born at Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān which is near Aleppo, Syria (Encyclopedia Britannica). He met with an accident, the accident of his father's death. When Ma'arri lost his father then like a hardwood follower son he composed an elegy (*ritha*) in praise of his dead father in the first phase of his poetic life.³ With the blind man's touch not only Ma'arri presents but also promises many philosophical endeavors through his insight, his soul search and then many times he turns an ardent atheist of language.

On the other hand, we have the contemporary Indian Urdu poet, ghazal writer, Nida Fazli also Muqtida Hasan Nida Fazli (12 Oct 1938 to 08 Feb 2016) who is much omitted in the western research, the oriental scientific papers and to reiterate with 'pessimism'-- even by the Indian scholars (not even with peripheral references). Although list of his achievements and impact of his works can easily be felt within the common masses and the poets of India. Fazli remained in India, away from his father. His father actually decided to live in Pakistan. When Fazli's father died he could not attend his last ceremonies. Then Fazli wrote an elegy for his father in Urdu.

The present paper intends to fill these gaps through this comparative study. Both of them (Ma'arri and Nida) wrote elegy for their fathers. In this paper I attempt to study the form, themes and structure of elegies written for their fathers with comparative tool of analysis. To fill the gap and bring these two poets closer I have, in this paper, humbly attempted to compare the elegies written for their fathers.

Kevin Blankinship has dexterously translated the elegy written by Ma'arri from Arabic to English. This paper has all the references to the above translation. However, the elegy of Nida has been translated from Urdu to English by the present scholar.

Introduction

Belonging to the Tanukh tribe, Ma'arri was a monotheist, ghazal writer, unconventional scholar fighting against the contemporary "Age of Ignorance" (*Jahiliyyah*) with his poetic thought full of musical language sans artificiality. His father Adb Allah son of Sulaiman al-Tanukhi was a renowned scholar who was appointed to the post of Qadi. Ma'arri's Bedouin style, in which he preferred to use pure words, was contradiction to the contemporary poetry of the Arab world. He challenged the linguistic and thematic strands in the contemporary poetry.⁴ Ma'arri's early collections of poems were *Saqt al-zand* ("The Tinder Spark") but *Luzumiyyat* (Necessities) is considered one of his greatest one.

Nida was awarded the fourth highest civilian award Padam Shri (2013) by the Government of India. He was also awarded the highest literary honor of India given by the Government of India---Sahitya Academy Award (1998) for his contribution to Urdu literature. As of now he is regarded as one of the best Urdu lyricists

of the Indian film Industry. On his death he was remembered in the Indian Parliament (08). When we search his name on the reservoir of Indian theses maintained by the Government of India we find no results showing a single work done on Nida (*Shodhganga*). He was more influenced by the poetry of Meera, Kabir, TS Eliot, Gogol and Anton Chekhov. His poetry is often laden with sensitivity, challenges and cries of humanity. On the other hand, Ma'arri has been called a pessimist and this phrase has been long used as a tool for relaxing the critical strains on thinking and comprehending. This phrase serves as a cliché which brings easy reception of this great poet. But the witticism of this poet should not always be marked “gloomy.”⁵ His witticism makes him the rising star of enlightenment. His very first line needs an attentive reader.⁶

What's in the Prelude (*nasib*)?

In the prelude (*nasib*) we can see the working of perfectly literal description here: If the grin is “fleshy” then who would like to praise it (as simple as that) (L. 1) ? But beyond its literariness when we see it from another dimension we gather that here this grin can be related to the contemptuous mock or vaginal monologue. But Ma'arri again scorns pale-delight (L.1). These recurring associations of disparaging the red appear in his poetry through veganism and perhaps his special ability to see only the red color. Skies don't always flash sneer but when it is “hazy” then obviously it will bring exclamatory sneer. All this said, what is literal in the simile of “full-bodied girls” or these sexual portraits (of redwound and untoothed) if not metaphorical (L.4)? These tautological references of negativity are well balanced with straight-forward realities, of sexual differences, of the contemporary times. What are the teeth that Ma'arri mentions(L.5)? It cannot be wisdom teeth as the wisdom teeth is rarely mentioned in speech, in linguistic articulation, as it develops from 18th and 30th year of our lives. Perhaps Ma'arri hinted at the labio-dental, inter-dental, sibilants/non-sibilants and the dental articulations. But like Nida, Ma'arri did not in any way feel sad for not attending the requiem of his father: *Tumhari kabr par mai, Fathah padne nahi aya* (Never I visited your grave /To read requiem) (L. 1).

Nida did not want to accept the fact that his father has died (*tum mar nahi sakte*, You can't die) (L. 2).. On the other hand, Ma'arri was more specific while he wrote about the perfect time of his father's death (that is---night) (L.7). Ma'arri, however, used the word “night” five times in his elegy (L. 7, 19, 40, 43 and 74). Then he further praised his father. He said that his father was pure, his reasoning was strong, he was graceful and while he was soiled his garments remained unsoiled (L. 10). Ma'arri dexterously took references from the *Quran* in this poem (the Judgment Day, Mount Uhud caves, Paradise, Adam). But again he missed no chance to call his father an enlightened soul. This is a mixture of *quisada* (or what we call praise) and nepotism. But the point of convergence here is that others dispraise the enlightened state of his father---the same which would have happened with Ma'arri as well.

The mother earth kills, corrupts, betrays and even buries her own sons and daughters as if they were “bastard” born (L. 25). But, while using the *Tawil* meter, somewhere else Ma'arri called his own body: “a herb of earth” (Nicholson 92).

Ma'arri as an Atheist of Language

We cannot call Ma'arri an atheist as such as he had firm faith in the God,” That knowledge is God's, the Generous” (L. 28). The allusion to “desert lords of language” has a metaphorical suggestion to *The Holy Quran* and to the history as well (L. 33). As we all know that the Arab Bedouin tribes usually inhabited these deserts. On the other hand, it also gives a new philosophy of language in which the desert becomes the symbol of mercy of Allah in which once stranded you find relief only by luck. Still human live there, with the infertile tool of language, they have to. Here the Speech Acts are useless. The Human communicates without meanings. Nonetheless, they become fake lords of the empire of language. Ma'arri seems to be atheist but an atheist of language as he suggests that we have to use language but language in turn gives us disbelief, that of a “jinn” (L.34):

As for those who disbelieve, their deeds are like a mirage in the desert which the thirsty takes for water till he reaches it to find that there was nothing, and finds God with him who settles his account, for God is swift at the reckoning. (Ali 1998, 24: 39)

The Philosophy of Sadness

Our sadness is like honey (L 38). We saw it, we harvested it like bees. But no one would accept our sorrow then why do we loot the harvest of bees? Ma'arri in his own style of thought makes metaphorical references to honey and sadness as also opens up new dimensions of melancholy. These dimensions take us to the varied characteristics of honey and sadness like: both have liquidity, both are sweet, both are actually earned through our actions, when it is looted by others it gives immense pain to the honey bee as sadness gives to the human beings and so on. Then Ma'arri speaks the universal truth: Everyone is afraid of death. The desire to live is so high on a grouse that it can swig in waterless mud (L 39). The wild cows also don't want to die despite their limpness (L 42). All these efforts of living creatures in one way look ridiculous. Then Ma'arri again alludes to The *Quran* as he refers to the desire of Adam and Eve to live forever despite the given promise of the Paradise(L. 49). For them death is sadness and earthly life is happiness. Ma'arri calls his father "lord of rhyme" (L. 50). He praises him for his eloquence (L 51). Then he asks Juhayna (جهينة) for the confirmation of the death of his father but what Ma'arri gets in return is "rumor" of father's death (L. 56-57). Nida does not disclose the name of person who gives him the news of his father's death but he boldly calls the news giver a liar, that too three times (L 11). Nida often feels the presence of his father in his chair but Ma'arri chooses to visit father's land in his honor (L 62). Ma'arri wrote that if his father "wails" then for sure he will succumb to it (L 72). Ma'arri asked the grave to "cruse" its soil and stone (L 92). Ma'arri wailed the death but he also upheld the fact that he lives inside his dead father through "sadness" (L 102). This is just reverse of what Nida wrote. For Nida the father lives in the son but for Ma'arri the son lives in father. Ma'arri finally promised to avoid all paths which will lead to pleasure (L 105). For Nida his father is a state of pleasure (L. 12). That's why Nida invites his dead father to read a requiem for him at his grave (which does not exist) (L.12).

Conclusion:

Both Nida and Ma'arri write elegies for their fathers.⁷ Their elegies grew out of the loss of beloved father. They create a philosophical world of human observations. These powerful expressions are more than occasional observations. Through these images and metaphors they create are compelling world of grief-stricken sons. They drive us into the melancholic and the soul search. Nevertheless, many themes within these elegies often converge and diverge. The ironies pointed out in this paper and reading both the poets had to do with their ignorance in scholarly writings. Eleven centuries of gathering relocates us into new observations today. Hope, the scholars like Blankinship will continue to ignite the fire through their meticulous translations and critical comments.

Notes

1. According to Blankinship, "[Ma'arri] had an especially strong following in the Islamic west (Iberia and North Africa). But despite that following...[his] legacy has thus far received inadequate attention in scholarship" (1).
2. Ma'arri claims that his true name was Abu-'l-Nuzul (the father of degradation). For this, see for example, Nicholson on page 87.

3. We have to know more about the father-son perception in the writings of Ma'arri as somewhere else he says, "I view as man's most bitter enemy/A son, the proper issue of his loins,/Howbeit in his folly he believes/The mares outmatched in racing by his colt" (Nicholson 112).
4. See, for example, Ma'arri's morphological reduction of the names mentioned in the *Qur'an* and *Hadith* in his *Risalat al-Mala'ika*, his best fable *Risalat al-Ghufran* which is a befitting reply to Ibn al-Qarih's (the grammarian) and his accusation of "zindiqs."
5. See, for example, Ibn al-'Adim and his monograph *on Abu'l-'Ala, al-Insaf wa 'l-taharri fi daf 'al-zulm wa 'l-tajarri 'an Abi 'l-'Ala' al-Ma'aari* ("Fair Treatment and Selection of the Best in Defending Abu'l-'Ala' against Unjustified Attacks") in which he believes that Ma'arri was not orthodox. 'A'isha 'Abd al-Rahman "Bint al-Shati" wrote a psychological study of Ma'arri based on his *Luzum*. The Arabic scholar Amjab al-Tarablusi and his critical comments on Ma'arri are most important. In *The Letters of Abu'l-'Ala'* DS Margoliouth writes a critical introduction to the life and works of Ma'arri. Krackovskiy's discussion is on Ma'arri's Ahmad (which is a commentary on Diwan of al-Mutanabbi). There is also critical introduction on 'Abath al-walid of Ma'arri by Muhammad 'Abd Allah al-Madani of Medina.
6. See more about the father-son perception in the writings of Ma'arri as somewhere else he says, "I view as man's most bitter enemy/A son, the proper issue of his loins,/Howbeit in his folly he believes/The mares outmatched in racing by his colt" (Nicholson 112).
7. Ma'arri also composed elegies for others' fathers such as of al-Radi and al-Murtada. His work *Siqt al-Zand* has seven elegies. Out of these seven elegies two odes are for his mother, one for his father and one for both mother and father. He also wrote elegies for Abu Hamzah al-Faqih, Ja'far ibn 'Ali ibn al-Muhadhhab and for his friend Abu Ibrahim al-Alawi. When Ma'arri died the elegy of Ibn Abi Husayna was recited at his grave. But his elegy for his father is somewhat similar to *Mu'allaqat* (لا بأس) (a long poem) like Amar b Kulthum wrote.

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