

Elegy in Classical and Modern Arabic Poetry: Contextual Overview

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Abstract: *The aim of the paper is to reveal what elegy in classical and Modern Arabic poetry contains across Arabic literary periods that is from Pre- Islamic period to modern era. The development reached by the poets in each period will be studied, and examples will be cited accordingly. The paper is divided into sub-headings, which include: Definition of elegy literally and technically, introduction of elegy in Arabic poetry, type of elegy, important features in elegy across literary Periods and conclusion.*

I. Introduction

Elegy, according to *Ibn Manzoor*, means crying for the dead and Praise for him¹, while Its' technical meaning, according to the book of *el-wasit*, is to enumerate virtues of the deceased and show eagerness on him², for the relationship or mutual understanding between the poet and the deceased.

Introduction of Elegy in Arabic poetry:

To determine the beginning of elegy in the history of Mankind is very difficult, if not impossible. Even though, the possible contact between Man and elegy was since he had the first encounter with death and its mortal force, it is therein, he shows his weakness over this Mighty force by showing what seems to be bellyaching and body pain, then, he starts shedding tears and finally burst into tears, in order to get relief from pain. He then frequently visits the grave of the deceased and stays for long time near it he sometimes pours wine on it, and shows other signs of sadness, over the death of the deceased which would not leave permanent or traceable signs.

Drawing statues and the inscriptions on the grave could be the first permanent signs on the grave used by Man as the elegy, for remembrance of the fallen heroes, and then he converts to lyric with the view of repeating the good qualities of the deceased, like: courage, honor, cleverness and smartness, and show his regret and sadness for the loss of these excellent virtues after the deceased, and call on others to bear the loss.

The lyric according to Prof. Abdulbaqy³, seems to be most permanent among other forms of elegy, because it converses with passion, raises emotion and awakens the heart, especially to the adherents of revealed religions, who do not appreciate those Statues, due to their similarity with idols.

Types of elegy:

There are two types of elegy; the one that concerns the poem, and the other one that concerns the deceased.

The one that concern the poem has three aspects, as follows:

1. To cry over the deceased and show your grievances and sadness over his death.
2. To remember the good deeds of the dead: That is to mention his good deeds during his life time and to be regretted over the loss of those excellent virtues after him.
3. Solace: That is to call others to bear the loss.

The other one that concerns the deceased has many aspects, such as to lament on a policy, leaders, scholars, families, friends, cities, villages, animals, and many other aspects of human life and the environment around him.

Important Features in Elegy across Literary Periods:

The art of elegy is similar to the art of eulogy in terms of mentioning one's good deeds and praising him for that. The poet in elegy praises someone and mentions his good deeds, but with dismay, sorrow and regret over the loss of those excellent virtues after him. This means that, the Poet can use the same expressions means for eulogy in the elegy, as used by the poets across Arabic literary periods, as follows:

Pre-Islamic Period:

The major features of eulogy in the Pre-Islamic era were four, as mentioned by Dr. *Shauqy Dhaif*.⁴ They are: intelligence, courage, chastity and justice. The Poets use them in their elegies to describe how the deceased was. Such as what *Khansa*' said to her deceased brother *Sakhr*⁵:

Indeed the father of Amr was your leader,

*Blessing be to the leader who rescues
His Subjects out of disaster,
He was Solid Tingling,
The giver, when they are ungenerous,
And brave during war,
Who shower weapon on the enemies
Indeed Sakhr was
Our commander and leader,
Who slaughters camels,
To feed his people in the Winter*

The above phases of the poem shows that *Sakhr* was a good leader of his people, brave, generous and worthy to be emulated in every excellent virtues, that was why he was honored and respected by his people.

Early Islamic Period:

The Poets who live in Pre-Islamic era and their life extended to the Islamic period are called Veteran poets. The poems composed by these poets are regarded as an extension to their former life during pre-Islamic era, due to non-difference between what they produced within the two periods, especially in the elegy, where they continued with praising the deceased and mentioning his good deeds with sorrow for its loss after his death. There is no significant impact of the new life of Islam over their methodology in the elegy, except what they usually mention in solace that is calling on others to bear the loss by reminding people that the world is not a permanent home for every mankind. There would be a day when he must leave it whether he likes it or not⁶. They also remind them that no condition is permanent, not only to the human folk, but to every creature in the universe, as cited by *Khansa*⁷:

*There is no doubt about the death,
In it, there are many lessons,
Condition is always changing.*

This expression doesn't show any Islamic impact on the poet, since it is obvious to every mankind to believe in death and condition changes, no matter what tribe he belongs to, or what religion he believes in.

Umayyad Period:

The poets of this era had shown signs of Islamic impact on their poems that was why they kept off in all that Islam forbids Muslims to do or to say it out in their daily activities, including what they say in the poems. So, they were sure that every word they uttered must be accounted for on the day of judgment. The poems must reflect the teaching of Islam. That was why the poets – during this era – praised their people with good characters that tally with Islamic teaching. Even though, the signs of *Jahiliyyah* expressions can be found in other aspects like eulogy, *ghazal* (love), Satire, etc. But in elegy, the poets tried to control their words to be within the Islamic law, such as attributing everything to the Almighty Allah, the Creator of the whole Universe and that everything is going to an end. They convinced people by quoting verses from the Quran, and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW), which was not used by the poets of the Pre – Islamic period and early Islamic era.

Examples of such expressions can be found in every poem of the period. Such as what *Jareer* said, as he lamented the death of his opponent, *Farazdaq*:

*The One who shoulder burden of fine,
For others, is dead,
He was the One,
Who always defeated Satan
The cheater and the deceiver*

The poet described the deceased as kind and generous to the extent, he pays for others, debt and fine, and described him as a very brave and strong person, who always defeated, not only his human opponents, but also the Satanic one. This is attribute that Islam calls on every Muslim to emulate.

Abbasid Period:

There is a popular saying in Arabic language which says: "Man lives in accordance with his environment culture and tradition". That was why the poets of this era were able to constitute new form of expressions in their elegies, beside the old ones they inherited from their forefathers, due to the new environment they found themselves in, which forced them to observe people they want to praise or to lament with different descriptions, that is to describe them individually with qualities that matched with their social and political position. Since it is not logical as *Shauqy* said: "it is not logical to praise secretary of state or federal government or a Minister or a Commissioner with courage, it is however possible to describe him with generosity, even though, the qualities

that matched his position logically, is to praise him with acumen, foresight and sage”⁸, and other forms of qualities that match with one’s rank and position.

The poets of this era had considered whom they want to praise or to lament, so as to describe him with the qualities that matches him, as Abdullahi bn Mu’tazzu did in his poem of lamenting Abdullahi bn Sulaiman bn Wahab el- Katibi⁹, the Minister under the Caliphate el- Mu’tutadid, when he said:

*The death has taken the person
Whom his opinions are always right
Who always speaks the truth
Who always measures every thing
With the correct measurement*

The Caliphates of this era prefer to be described with good qualities in guiding their subject towards what will benefit them here and the hereafter. This is because the Caliphate who is considered to be a religious leader of his people, he is also at the same time their leader in their worldly activities. Therefore, the poets praised them with these qualities during their life and lamented on them after them, as *Abu Nuwas* said in his elegy to the Caliphate el- Amin¹⁰:

*Oh! Aminullahi who will be like you
In generosity and the infallibility of the weak
And releasing the prisoner
You left us after your death
We are crying with copious tears
For the loss of your precious deeds
For here and the hereafter*

With the above deferent descriptions on deferent persons, we can understand that the poets of this era look at people differently with regards to their positions when they want praise or lament on them.

The above examples of the elegy are on deceased humanbeings. There are other types of elegy which emerged for the first time in this era, which includes elegy on cities, animals and weakness of one’s Manhood.

The elegy of cities emerged for the first time in the history of Arabic poems in this era for two reasons, as mentioned by *Shauqy*¹¹. The first reason is that, the relationship of Man with cities was not as strong as it was during this period, while the second one was that, the Islamic cities did not experience any serious attack, destruction, and demolition as experienced in this era, so the poets expressed these bad events with agony and sorrow, which is regarded as elegy.

The city of Bagdad in Iraq was the first city that faced this kind of destruction which phased out all its’ beauty. This occurred toward the end of power struggle between Amin and his brother Ma’mun. Example of this can be seen in the poem of Umar bn Abdulmalik el-Mu’tazzy el-Warraaq¹², when he said:

*What exactly happened to you my dear Bagdad!!!
Were you not my beautiful Darling in previous years?*

The cities of Basra, Kufa and Medina are among the cities that faced the destruction of war.

The elegy on animals also emerged in this era, due to emotion generated from strong relationship between Man and pet animals like dogs and cats, to the extent, that if it is lost or died he shed tears for it, and composed elegy to lament on it, if he is a poet, as *Abu Nuwas*¹³ said to his hunting dog, after it died as a result of snake bite:

*I am grieve to my dog,
The leader of all dogs,
It hunted on my behalf
One day we were in bush
Snake sneaked
And bit it to death*

The poet described the dog - with dismay and sorrow - as brilliant in hunting, with it he needed nothing in successful hunting, but a snake killed it in bush, so he promised to take revenge by killing the snake.

The elegy of one’s weakness of Manhood is also one of the creative talent of the poets of the era, but poems narrators didn’t show their willingness to narrate such poems due to what is regarded as taboo and unwanted expressions, that is why Dr. *Shauqy* mentioned the existence of such poems, but refused to cite an example for it¹⁴.

The narrators managed to narrate such poems from only two poets who competed with each other on it, they are - (as mentioned by Abdullahi bn Mu’tazzu in his book: *Dabaqaat el-Shu’ra’a*,¹⁵) - *Abu Hakeemat Rasheed bn Ishaq* and *Ahmad bn Abi Tahir*.

Abu Hakeemat, as narrated by bn Mu’tutazzu, complained about the weakness of his manhood in Agony and sorrow when he said¹⁶:

*For how many times
You are lying down on my hands*

Even though

You are encouraged

To erect

Ahmad bn Abi Dahir also had similar complaint on his manhood when he said¹⁷:

Oh! My manhood

With time you turned me down

Who will I blame?

My manhood's case is that

It is being encouraged to erect

But it refuses

II. The Modern Period

When the modern era emerged, and the relationship between Arabs and western countries was very strong, the Arab poets established new forms of elegy. The poet in this form will not mention the good deeds of the deceased and show them, or the societal agony and sorrow for the loss of those excellent virtues, as we have seen in the classical era, rather his expressions will be philosophical which describe the nature of life and death, he will also concern himself with his ego only and personal feelings, such as the elegy of Abbas Mahmood el-Aqqad¹⁸ to his deceased young daughter:

The face of the flower

Is light of my heart and my eyes

The death took her carelessly

She disappeared from me

Even though, my knowledge to her

Is fresh in my memory

The poet here described the deceased's face as beautiful as blossom of flower. The verse seems to be more of love poem (*ghazal*) than elegy.

He then came up with another expression in the poem that has no relationship with classical elegy, which can be seen as fun and imagination than elegy, when he said:

When the darkness of sunset approaches

When everybody falls asleep,

Come out of the grave

And knock the door of our house in the night,

This is not averse dream,

To continue with your normal life

That is a dream of a reckless person,

Play with fun in our chest

And laugh secretly,

Then go back to your grave in the early morning

Endurance of grave imprisonment

Is very difficult to small children like you

Elegy of one's self is also one of the new forms of elegy which emerged in this era, where a poet considered himself as dead, and composed a poem describing himself with qualities that he thinks deserve him after his death, as Abdulkadir el-Maziny¹⁹ did, when he composed a very long poem describing himself with bad qualities:

A person who is not worthy

To be sympathized has died.

He was a young man who was deceived by

His ability to compose poems

He has been a liar, hypocrite, Cur in his habits

His virtues are very few

This form of elegy was not known by the classical poets, even though there were similar poems narrated during Arabs Spain rule. As reported by the narrators that Abu el-Hassan²⁰ composed a poem, in it he described himself with excellent qualities, and put it under his pillow, it wasn't discovered until after his death. He said in the poem:

Say to my relatives when they see me dead

When they cry and lament for me with sorrow and agony

Do they cry for the missing soul?

Or for the dead body that is before you presently

Do you think I am a dead person?

No, it is not true I swear to God that I am not dead

*I am presently residing in castle,
What is before you is just my dead body
I was like a bird in a cage when I was alive
I thank God who releases me from this cage
And built the castle for me in the heaven*

The difference between this poet and the immediate past one was that, the first one feels negatively while the second one feels positively, so every one of them described himself the way he feels people will look at him after his death.

III. Conclusion

With this brief introduction to major features of elegy in classical and modern Arabic poetry, we can notice changes and developments in expressions cited by different poets across literary periods, which depend on the nature and form of the elegy. Example of each form and type was cited in the paper across the periods, namely, pre-Islamic period, early Islamic period, Umayyad and Abbasid periods, as well as the modern era.

Endnotes:

- [1] Ibn Manzoor, Lisan el- Arab, Dar Sadar, Beirut Lebanon, no date, bab el-hamza, fasl el-ra'
- [2] Ahmad el-Askandary and Mustapha 'nany, El-Wasiti fi el-Adab el-Araby wa tareekhuhu, Dar el- Ma'rif Egypt 1916, page: 48
- [3] Abdulbaqy Shu'aibu Agaka, (Professor), Fannu el-Ratha' inda Muhammadu el-Bukhary bn el-Sheik Usmanu bn Fodiyo, Ameeru Tambuwal, A paper presented at a seminar organized by the center for Islamic studies, Usmanu Dan Fodiyo University, Nigeria, date: 10-15 April 1986, Page: 1
- [4] Shauqy Dhaif, (Dr.), Tareekh el-Adab el-Araby: el- Asr el- Abbassy el- Auwal, Dar el-Ma'rif Egypt, Page: 357
- [5] No Author and date, Min Shi'ri el- Ratha', Dar el- Turath el- Araby, Beirut Lebanon, Page: 9
- [6] Shauqy Dhaif, (Dr.), *op. cit.*, Page: 207
- [7] No Author and date, *loc. cit.*
- [8] Shauqy Dhaif, (Dr.), *op. cit.*, Page: 357
- [9] Shauqy Dhaif, (Dr.), *op. cit.*, Page: 363
- [10] Shauqy Dhaif, (Dr.), *op. cit.*, Page: 362
- [11] Shauqy Dhaif, (Dr.), *op. cit.*, Page: 364
- [12] Shauqy Dhaif, (Dr.), *op. cit.*, Page: 365
- [13] Shauqy Dhaif, (Dr.), *op. cit.*, Page: 387-389
- [14] Shauqy Dhaif, (Dr.) *op. cit., op. cit.* Page: 381
- [15] Ibn el- Mu'tazzu, Tabaqat el- Shu'ra', Page: 390
- [16] Ibn el- Mu'tazzu, *loc. cit.*
- [17] Ibn el- Mu'tazzu, *op. cit.*, Page: 416
- [18] Mustapha Badawy, Mukhtarat min el- Shi'r el-Araby el- Hadeeth, Dar el-Nahar li el- Nashri, Beirut Lebanon, 1969, Page: 62
- [19] Mustapha Badawy, *op. cit.*, Page: 64
- [20] Abdullahi Kanoon, el- Nubug el- Magriby fi el- Adab el- Araby vol. 3, second edition, 1961, Page 927