

Chapter 13: The Precedence Of The Shi'ah In Various Genres Of Poetry

The Shiah founded new techniques which gained the appreciation of poets who then, took after them. The first and foremost genius among Muslim poets is al-Farazdaq about whom Jarir said that he owned the spring of poetry, meaning the most competent of the Muslim poets. It is worth noticing that some Shi'ah poets like al-Nabighah al-Ju'adi came even before him. The latter composed the following verses about Siffin:

It is known to Iraq, Egypt and Syria,

That Ali is their paragon of freedom.

Magnanimous, hospitable, light in complexion,

His mother, the lady with ample dowry.

Most generous of those to whom others hold fast,

The first band had met you, thereafter, may they never stir!

They have a turn and you have a turn , as well,

Of which people are cognizant.

To guidance you did drive the folk,

But your foes called to unworthiness.

Another Shi'ah poet is Ka'ab ibn Zuhayr, the composer of Banat Su'ad in which he says:

The Prophet's son in-law, the best of all people,

Whoever vied with him for glory is surpassed.

Along with the Unlettered One, he was the first to pray,

While the people were still heathens.

Others who preceded al-Farazdaq were: Labid ibn Rabi'ah al-'Amiri whom the author of *Riyad al-Ulama* referred to as one of the Shi'ah poets; Abu al-Tufail 'Amir ibn Wa'ilah, the famous poet and one of the companions whom Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani considers one of the prominent Shi'ah; Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali, about whom Ibn Bitriq states in *Al-Umdah*: "he was one of the best and most eloquent men from the first category of Muslim poets and partisans of Ali ibn Abi Talib ('a); the most well-known al-Hasan Abu Nu'as and then Abu Tammam, Habib and al-Buhturi who have, in reality, eclipsed five hundred skilled poets who were their contemporaries. This fact is recorded in the *Umdah* of Ibn Rashiq. A poet captures this situation in the following verses:

If you want to be a knight be like Ali,

If a poet, emulate Ibn Hani.

The first poet whose poetry was named 'the golden chain' is al-Buhturi. The first one who earned the epithet 'polisher of meanings' is Abu Tammam and he was the first to classify his selections of Arabic poetry into eight kinds, the first of which was about enthusiasm (*hamasah*). The third most famous poet is Ibn al-Rumi. All of them were Shi'ites. We have mentioned their biographies in the unabridged version of this work.

In the rank of people like Abu Nuwas there is a number of notable poets among the Shi'ah like Abu al-Shis, al-Husayn ibn al-Dahhak, al-Khali' and Di'bil. And in the category of Habib and al-Buhturi we have Shi'ah poets such as Dik al-Jinn, who was named the poet of Syria. Di'bil al-Khuzai went to see him but he concealed himself for fear of Di'bil's severe criticism and obstinacy. So, Di'bil said: "Why does he hide himself while he is the best poet of jinn and men? *Is he not the one who said:*

Still not bored by her, raise the veil,

And serve her wine from evening till daybreak.

And with those large posteriors, commit such vice,

The retribution of which alarms the guardian angels."

On hearing this, Dik al-Jinn appeared, apologized and attended to him.

These two poets were among the literary figures who did not seek through their poetry the approval of caliphs, princes or other personalities. This noble trait raised them above their peers.

As regards post-classical authors, Ibn Rashiq reports: "According to the words of al-Hadhdhaq, Abu Tammam and Ibn al-Rumi are the most remarkable post-classical authors as far as invention and originality are concerned".

Indeed Abu Tammam used to polish up meanings while Ibn al-Rumi employed new meanings that were unheard of before by digging deep in search of rare ones and bringing out other thematic imports beautifully. When he took up a theme he would never leave it without exhausting it. He was famous for the originality of his poetry. He was born in Baghdad in 221 A.H. and died in 283 A.H.

Another poet of the same era is al-Kumayt ibn Zayd al-Mudari al-Asadi. Ibn Ikrimah al-Dabiy says: "Had it not been for al-Kumayt's poetry, neither the Arabic language nor rhetoric would have been intelligible" When Abu Muslim al-Harra was asked about al-Kumayt he answered: "That one is the best of the earlier and later poets". In fact his *Hashimiyyat* which has been recently been printed in Egypt is clear proof of that.

The pioneer in lengthy panegyrics is Kathir. Ibn Rashiq informs us that Ibn Abi Ishaq, a well-known literary critic used to say: "The most accomplished poet of the pre-Islamic era is Mushriq and among the Muslims is Kathir. Ibn Rashiq considers this a too extreme view although all scholars agree that he was the first person to compose lengthy panegyrics". This proves that the Shi'ah took the lead in this type of poetry.

The first poet to compose much poetry about a single theme was al-Sayyid al-Himyari. Ibn al-Mu'tazz states in *Al-Tadhkhirah* that al-Sayyid al-Himyari had four daughters, and each one of them committed to memory four hundred *qasidahs* composed by her father. He versified whatever he heard of Ali's merits and feats similar to his versification of the hadith. All his *qasidahs* were long. He was a Shi'ah who openly declared his stand although his parents were not of the same persuasion. He hailed from Himyar in Syria. Once he said: 'Mercy has been abundantly poured on me so that I became like the believer of the people of the Pharaoh' ". He died in 173 (some say in 193 and others say in 199 A.H).

I have mentioned in the original version of this book the names of ancient and recent Shi'ah poets who composed poetry only on extolling the Ahl al-Bayt versifying their virtues.

Some poets took up unreserved poetry and were their time's masters for this invention. Ibn al-Hajjaj al-Husayn ibn Ahmad al-Katib al-Baghdadi was a pioneer in this field. His poetry is characterized by a unique style, sweetness and spontaneity. A collection of his poetry runs into ten volumes from which al-Sayyid al-Sharif al-Radi selected the anthology he called *Al-Hasin min Shi'r al-Husayn*. Hibatullah ibn Hasan al-Asturalabi, the poet who was also proficient with the astrolabe has arranged Ibn al-Hajjaj's work into a hundred and forty-one chapters, each dealing with a specific style of poetry giving it the title *Durrat al-Taj fi Shi'r Ibn al-Hajjaj*. Ibn al-Hajjaj died in 391 and was buried somewhere near the mausoleum of Imam Musa al-Kazim ('a). Al-Asturalabi died in 434 A.H.

The first to invent the *muwashshah al-mudhamman* which is a form of poetry in stanzas, was Safiyuddin

al-Hilli, a unique poet who died in the year 750. He himself collected his *diwan* in three volumes containing good poetry. His *diwan* is among the excellent ones.

The first proficient poet who wrote profusely is al-Sayyid al-Sharif al-Radi, al-Murtada's brother. He was the first to be named the best poet of the Quraysh and the Talibis (the descendants of Abu Talib). Of the earlier or the later poets no one was at par with him.

Mehyar al-Dailami, a servant of al-Sharif al-Radi, is counted among the merits of the latter. He was among the unique personalities of his time. His *diwan* consists of four volumes of excellent unequalled poetry. Al-Dailami had a son who took after him in learning, as mentioned in *Dumyat al-Qasr*. He was the composer of *Al-Ha'iyyah* (verses which end in the sound 'ha') in which he says:

Oh silent gentle breeze blowing from Kazimiyyah

What burning passion and desire you have stirred up!

His name was Abu Abdillah al-Husayn ibn Mehyar ibn Marzawaih al-Kisrawi. He died in 428 A.H.

Among them is someone whose prominence al-Mutanabbi acknowledged and confessed that he did not have the audacity to compete with him, that is Abu Firas al-Harath ibn Hamdan. No poet apart from Abu al-Tayyib al-Mutanabbi can be compared to him. We have just heard al-Mutanabbi's word in favour of him as recorded in *Al-Yatimah*. Al-Sahib ibn Ubbad is related to have said: "Poetry started with a king and closed with a king", meaning Imri'u al-Qays and Abu Firas respectively. The latter passed away in 320 A.H.

Among them is the single most accomplished poet of the western Islamic lands, as attested to unanimously, that is, Abu al-Qasim Muhammad ibn Hani al-Andalusi al-Maghribi, the Moroccan Imamiyyah Shi'ah who was killed in 362 A.H. Ibn Khillikan said: "In the western Islamic lands no one among the earlier or latter poets equalled him in rank. Indeed he was absolutely their best who was to them what his contemporary al-Mutanabbi was to the people of the east".

Another is the poet nicknamed Kashajim. His name was Abu al-Fath (or Abu al-Futuh) Mahmud (or Muhammad) ibn al-Hasan (or al-Husayn) ibn al-Sindi ibn Shahik, author of *Al-Masa'id wa al-Matarid*. His nickname is derived from four words *katib*, *sha'ir*, *mutakallim* and *munajjim* (writer, poet, theologian and astrologer). He was accomplished in all fields and most prominent in the art of description in his time. He was a Shi'ah. In *Ma'alim al-Ulama*, Rashid al-Din counts him among the panegyrist of the Ahl al-Bayt. Kashajim's case is a confirmation of Allah's words: "He brings forth the living from the dead" because he was among the offspring of al-Sindi who poisoned Imam Musa ibn Ja'afar ('a) while the latter was in his custody. Kashajim died in the year 350 A.H.

The first poet to be called al-Nashi (the one who grows up) was Ali ibn Abdillah ibn Wasi, the poet. Al-Sam'ani says: "Nashi referred to someone who devotes his youth to a particular style of poetry and

earns a reputation in it” He adds: “The one who was known by this epithet is Ali ibn Abdillah, the renowned poet who lived during the days of al–Muqtadir, al–Qadir and al–Radi, among others. He hailed from Baghdad and lived in Egypt”. Ibn Kathir al–Shami declares in his Tarikh that al–Nashi was a Shi’ah theologian. Likewise, Ibn al–Nadim counts him among the Imamiyyah theologians. Ibn Khillikan considers him an eminent Shi’ah personality and the author of Nasamah al–Sahar prefers him to al–Mutanabbi, observing that the latter had adopted al–Nashi’s poetry and adds that the concise style of al–Nashi and his precedence have exposed al–Mutanabbi.

Ibn Khillikan has mentioned the *qasidah* (poem) from which al–Mutanabbi plagiarized to praise Saif al–Daulah. It opens thus:

*Through the family of Muhammad is rightness known,
In their noble apartments, the Book descended.
They are the proofs of the Lord against the people,
About their station and their patriarch’s none can argue.
Particularly Abu al–Hasan Ali,
Whose venerable position of honour is distinct.
His sword’s food is the foe’s throat
And their flowing blood is what it sips
As though its tip were in nature, a heart,
It aims at nothing but the hearts.
His spear desires naught but the necks,
Like their pledge to him at Khumm.
At prayer niche by night he weeps and winces excessively
And in the thick of battle he regularly laughs.
He is the great tiding, the ark of Noah,
The gate of Allah and that is that!*

Al–Nashi was born in 271 and died in 366 A.H. at the ripe age of ninety–five.

The first to flourish in all styles of poetry is Ali ibn Ishaq ibn Khalaf who came to be known as *al–Zahi*,

(the flourishing one). This Baghdadi poet was one of the unique personalities of his time. Al-Khatib, Abu Sa'id ibn Abdurrahim in *Tabaqat al-Shu'ara*, Ibn Khillikan in *Al-Wafayat*, al-Qadi in *Tabaqat al-Shi'ah* and Ibn Shahrashub in *Ma'alim Ulama al-Shi'ah* recorded the biography of al-Zahi. Ibn Shahrashub said: "He used to praise the Ahl al-Bayt openly". Al-Zahi was born in 318 A.H. and died in 352 A.H. and was buried near the tomb of Imam Musa ibn Ja'far ('a), in the Quraysh Cemetery.

The first illiterate to be endowed with miraculous talent in poetry is Nasr ibn Ahmad al-Khub Dharzi Abu al-Qasim, who was famous for his love of poetry and who was known far and wide. All historical books and biographies wrote about him. The author of *Al-Yatimah* cites some of his verses and says that he was a Shi'ah. Ibn Khillikan says that he died in the year 317 A.H.

Another illiterate poet is Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Hamdan known as al-Khabbaz al-Baladi with the agnomen Abu Bakr who was a famous poet. In *Al-Yatimah* al-Tha'alibi considers him one to the gifts of the world. He also writes "What is peculiar about him is that he was illiterate but his poetry was full of exquisite pieces and anecdotes. His poems (maqtu's) never lack beautiful expressions or frequently used proverbs. He learnt the Qur'an by heart and draws on it for his poetry And he was a Shi'ah. He plainly expresses his loyalty to the Shi'ah School of thought in his poetry". Al-Tha'alibi cites examples of these kinds of verses.

The first poet to open the door to allusion (al-tauriyyah) and succeed in employing it with remarkable ease and harmony is Alauddin al-Wada'i al-Kindi whose full name is Ali ibn al-Muzaffar ibn Ibrahim ibn Umar ibn Zayd. He is the author of the famous *Al-Tadhkirah* which is known as *Al-Tadhkirah al-Kindiyyah*. It comprises of fifty volumes treating several branches as recorded by the author of *Nasamat al-Sahar*, who also quotes what Sheikh Taqiuddin mentioned about al-tauriyyah in his *Kashf al-Litham* and says that Ibn Nabatah has adopted from al-Wadi'i's poetry. Then he observed: "And the merits of Sheikh Ala'uddin can fill a whole volume". In short, the famous Ibn Nabatah actually depended on al-Wada'i. In *Fawat al-Wafayat* there is a nice biographical account of the latter which confirms that Ala'uddin was a Shi'ah. I have incorporated it in the original version of this book. Al-Hafiz al-Dhahabi has also given the same account. Al-Kindi died in the year 716 A.H.

Referring to Sibt ibn al-Ta'awidhi, a well-known poet, Ibn Khillikan reports that during the two hundred years preceding him no one produced anything comparable to his work. His full name is Abu al-Faraj Muhammad ibn Ubaydullah al-Katib. Ibn Khillikan adds that al-Ta'awidhi was the master poet of his time who combined eloquence and the sweetness of expression with subtlety and depth of import. I believe that during the two centuries that preceded his time no one produced anything that resembled his work".

The author of *Nasamat al-Sahar* says: "I have seen his *diwan* and he deserves Ibn Khillikan's extolling. He was among the eminent Shi'ite personalities". Al-Sam'ani says: "When I asked him about his birth he answered that it was in al-Karkh in 476. He died in Jumada al-Ula, 553 A.H."

Similar to him is Sharif Abu al-Hasan Ali al-Hammani, an outstanding poet whose forefathers Sharif Muhammad, Ja'far and Muhammad were all poets. Muhammad is the son of Zayd ibn Ali ibn al-Husayn ibn Ali ibn Abi Talib ('a). He is mentioned and highly praised in *Nasamat al-Sahar*. Yaqut says: "In poetry, culture and traits al-Hammani among the Alids resembles the renown of Abdullah Ibn al-Mu'tazz among the Abbasids. He used to say: "I am a poet and so were my father and grandfather, down to Abu Talib".

No doubt, al-Hammani was the most outstanding poet of the time of the Abbasid caliph al-Mutawakkil as Imam Ali al-Hadi ('a) attests in a hadith related by al-Baihaqi in *Al-Mahasin wa al-Masawi* in the chapter about the merits of taking pride in the Prophet and his family. I have mentioned him and cited a piece of his verses in the original version of this book. He is one of the poets discussed in *Al-Yatimah* and *Al-Aghani*. Abu Tamam has mentioned some of his verses on *hamasah*, and Sayyid al-Murtad has mentioned him in *Al-Mushfi*, citing some of his verses as well.

Among the Hashimite poets is al-Fadl ibn Abbas ibn Utbah ibn Abu Lahab whom al-Sayyid al-Madani, in *Al-Darajat al-Rafi'ah*, and the author of *Nasamat al-Sahr* have mentioned and a biographical account of whom is presented by Abu al-Faraj in *Al-Aghani*.

Among the Qurayshite Shi'ah poets, as reported in *Al-Husun al-Mani'ah* is Abu Duhbul Wahb ibn Rabi'ah al-Jamahi. He is mentioned by ibn Qutaybah in *Kitab al-Shi'ir wa al-Shu'ara*, al-Murtada in his *Al-Amali* and al-Zubayr ibn Bakkar. He is one of the poets whom Abu Tammam included in *Diwan al-Hamasah* (a selection of poetry on enthusiasm). I have cited, in the unabridged version some of his elegies on Abu Abdillah al-Husayn ('a) and presented the biographies of the aforementioned poets as well as that of other Shi'ah poets.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/shiah-and-islamic-disciplines-sayyid-hasan-al-sadr/chapter-13-precedence-shiah-various-genres-poetry#comment-0>