

# IMRA' UL-QAYS: FATHER OF SIMILE IN PRE-ISLAMIC TIMES

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Imra' ul-Qays, Abū 'l-Hārith Hunduj,<sup>246</sup> son of Hijr al-Kindī,<sup>247</sup> one of the foremost poets of the 6<sup>th</sup> century pre-Islamic Arabia whose unparalleled poetic talent and its injurious impact on society were epitomized in the following saying of the Holy Prophet (Peace be upon him) that “he was the most poetic of all poets, and their leader to Hell-fire”<sup>248</sup> was the scion of the precarious north Arabian kingdom of Kindah<sup>249</sup> and on his mother's side he was descended from the famous tribe of Taghlib.<sup>250</sup> His father who ruled over the tribe of Banū Asad was treacherously killed by one of his subjects. Having failed to muster enough support despite his relentless efforts to avenge this dastardly act, Imra' ul-Qays finally took refuge at the court of the Roman emperor, Justinian I. After a long stay at Constantinople, he was named the phylarch of Palestine and received a body of troops from Justin II. Strengthened by this newly acquired military contingent, Imra' ul-Qays once again set out for Arabia to settle score with the assassin of his father, but, in the meanwhile, one of his inveterate enemies from the same tribe of Banū Asad, who had been following him from place to place, charged him

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\* The author is extremely grateful to Professor Dr M. Saleem Akhtar, of the Centre for the Study of Persianate Societies, 18 / A-2, Gulber III, Lahore - 54660, Pakistan, for his infinite help and perpetual guidance in the improvement of this article.

<sup>246</sup> *Mu'allaqāt-i-Sab'*, Persian trans., 'Abd al-Muhammad Āyatī, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., Tehran: Surūsh, 1397 Shamsī, p.11.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>248</sup> Muhammad Iqbal, “Our Prophet's Criticism of Contemporary Arabian Poetry”, *Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal*, ed. Latif Ahmed Sherwani, Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1977, p.124. Also see Muhammad Salīm Akhtar, “Rasūl-i-Maqbūl kā apnē 'ahd kī shā'irī par tabsirah aur Iqbā”, *Daryāft*, NUML, Islamabad, Annual Number 3 (2004), 353-367.

<sup>249</sup> H. A. R. Gibb. *Arabic Literature, an introduction*, London, OUP, 1974, p.23.

<sup>250</sup> <http://historymedren.about-com./od/aentries/a/11-amru-htm>, p. 1 (6/8/2008)

before the emperor with the seduction of a princess. Consequently, the emperor sent him a poisoned cloak, which caused his death at Ancyra.<sup>251</sup>

Most of Imrū' ul-Qays's poems have been lost and what is left is a small book of poems including about 25 odes together with some literary pieces. It was first published by MacGuckin de Slane at Paris, in 1837.<sup>252</sup> However, his most famous contribution is his *Mu'allaqah*, or the "suspended poem" which comprises 82 verses and starts with the following couplet:<sup>253</sup>

قفا نَبَاكَ مِنْ ذِكْرِي حَبِيبٍ وَمَنْزِلِ بِسْفَطِ اللَّوِيِّ بَيْنَ الدَّخُولِ فَحَوْمَلِ

Oh, co-travellers let us stop and, for the sake of the beloved's memory/  
cry in the sandy place between Dakhūl and Haumal.<sup>254</sup>

The poem has been extensively written about and commented upon, over the centuries, by numerous renowned authorities, such as Ahmad bin Muhammad al-Nahhās (d. 949 A.D.), Abu 'Abd Allah Husayn bin Ahmad Zūzanī (d. 1091 A.D.) and Khatīb Tabrīzī (d. 1108 A.D.). It has also been translated, from time to time, into German,<sup>255</sup> English<sup>256</sup> and Persian<sup>257</sup> languages.

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid., also see <http://infao5501.ag5.mpi-sb.mpg.de:8080/topx/archive?link=Wikipedia-L..../2598989.xml&styl>. Abū'l-Faraj 'Alī bin al-Husayn al-Isfahānī relates many stories of his life in his stupendous work, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, Egypt ed., Vol. VIII, 62-67.

<sup>252</sup> Cf. *Mu'allaqat-i-Sab'*, p.11, where the year of publication has been erroneously mentioned as 1877. Imrū'ul-Qays's poems are also included in Wilhelm Ahlwardt's *The Divans of Six Ancient Arabian Poets*, London, 1870.

<sup>253</sup> *Mu'allaqāt-i-Sab'*, p. 19.

<sup>254</sup> The English rendering of this and those of the subsequent verses of the *Mu'allaqah* are based upon the Persian translation of 'Abd al-Muhammad Āyatī, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-18; [http://sacred-texts/isl/hanged\\_1.htm](http://sacred-texts/isl/hanged_1.htm); and [http://fordham.edu/halsall/source/640\\_hangedpoems.html](http://fordham.edu/halsall/source/640_hangedpoems.html) (5/24/08)

<sup>255</sup> Friedrich Rückert, *Amrīlkais der Dichter und König*, Stuttgart, 1843.

<sup>256</sup> W. S. Blunt, *Seven Golden Odes of Pagan Arabia*, London, 1903; A. J. Arberry. *The Seven Odes*, London, 1954 and two English translations referred to in n.9, above.

<sup>257</sup> *Sharh-i-Sab'ah Mu'allaqah*, Government Printing Press, Lahore, 1871 and 'Abd al-Muhammad Āyatī, *op. cit.*

Imra' ul-Qays who led a dissolute life and was known for his overindulgence in winebibbing and carefree manners, passionately loved his cousin, 'Unayzah and as the legend goes, once he followed her to the pool Dārati Juljul<sup>258</sup> where she had gone picnicking with her friends. While the maidens were bathing in the pool, Imra' ul-Qays captured their clothes and would not surrender these until each one of them came out of the water and asked for hers. They held back as long as possible before they yielded to this demand of his. Afterwards, when the damsels complained of hunger, Imra' ul-Qays forthwith slew his camel to feed them. Having eaten their food, lest he should be left stranded in the desert, the girls divided the trappings of his camel, each carrying home a part upon her beast, while the carrying of the poet himself fell to the lot of 'Unayzah, who jestingly protested that the howdah on her camel's back was too small to accommodate them both.<sup>259</sup>

The *Mu'allaqah* of Imra' ul-Qays mainly revolves around three main themes, namely, the elegiac reminiscence of love and poet's mourning at the erstwhile encampment of his beloved (verses 1-9), the frank restatement of his amatory adventures, especially at the Dārati Juljul (verses 10-43), and the glimpses of whatever he had encountered in the course of his wanderings during his homelessness. This last includes beautiful portrayal of phenomena of nature such as night (44-49), thunderstorm (verses 71-73) and flood (verses 74-82), animals like wolves (50-52) and horse and his hunting exploits (53-70).

Not only first in point of time, but in poetic talent also, according to most of the critics, Imra' ul-Qays's *Mu'allaqah* stands unrivalled and Arabs, in general, looked upon it as an example par excellence of beauty and creativity.<sup>260</sup> According to H. A. R. Gibb, this "poem is entirely self-centred, and noted for its natural descriptions, including a fine picture of a thunderstorm, as well as for the frankness of his amatory passages."<sup>261</sup>

Imra' ul-Qays is credited with the innovation of starting his odes with crying over the relics of the deserted encampment of the beloved, of

<sup>258</sup> A place within the domain of the Kindah tribes. See 'Abd al-Muhammad Āyatī, 23, n. 10.

<sup>259</sup> [http://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/hanged/hanged\\_1.htm](http://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/hanged/hanged_1.htm), footnote 2 (6/9/2008)

<sup>260</sup> Hannā al-Fākhūrī, *Ta'rikh-i-Adabīyyat-i-Zabān-i-'Arabī*, Persian tr., 'Abd al-Muhammad Āyatī, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Tehran: Tūs Publications, 1368 Shamsī, 58-59.

<sup>261</sup> H. A. R. Gibb, 23.

speaking of love so passionately, of weaving beautiful images into his poems, and of skillfully employing short and meaningful descriptions (of women, hunting scenes, horses, camels and nights).<sup>262</sup> These themes not only possessed an enduring appeal for the poet and his audience, but they also left an indelible imprint on the poetry of succeeding generations of poets as well. Summarizing this aspect of the pre-Islamic poetry, in which Imra' ul-Qays no doubt, excelled all his contemporaries, H. A. R. Gibb rightly observes:

After depicting the final separation from his beloved as her tribe moves off to seek fresh pastures, the poet pursues his journey and seizes the occasion to describe, some time briefly but often with all an expert's enthusiasm, the fine points of his camel or horse. Its swiftness and endurance of fatigue on his long and dangerous journeys leads him to compare it to a wild ass, ostrich, or oryx, but the comparison often seems to become submerged as the theme is developed into a lively picture of animal life or of a hunting scene, which to western taste is often the most attractive section of the poem.<sup>263</sup>

Characterized by peculiar aesthetic sensibilities, apt use of words, irresistible emotive power, one of the most important hallmarks of Imra' ul-Qays's poetry is his exquisite employment of similes, a trait which has deservedly earned him the epithet of the 'creator of images'.<sup>264</sup> The chief characteristic of his similes is that they are sensory, a feature which is amply illustrated by the following verses of his *Mu'allaqah*. Boasting of his amatory adventures and the enticing beauty of his beloved he has this to say:

وَبَيْضَنِهِ خَدْرٍ لَا يُرَامُ خَبَاؤُهَا تَمَتَّعْتُ مِنْ لَهْوِ بِهَا غَيْرَ مُعْجَلٍ<sup>265</sup>

Many a veiled and egg like fair woman, whose tent was even inaccessible to others/ I enjoyed playing with her leisurely.

<sup>262</sup> J. M. 'Abd al-Jalīl, *Ta'riḫ-i-Adabiyāt-i-'Arab*, tr., A. Adharnūsh, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., Tehran: Amīr Kabīr Publications, 1381 Shamsī, 46.

<sup>263</sup> *Arabic Literature, An Introduction*, 16-17.

<sup>264</sup> [http://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/hanged/hanged\\_1.htm](http://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/hanged/hanged_1.htm), p.5 (6/9/2008).

<sup>265</sup> Abū 'Abd Allah Husayn bin Ahmad Zūzanī, *Sharḥ al-Mu'allaqāt al-Sab' al-Tiwāl*, ed. 'Umar al-Tabbā', 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Beirut: Dār al-Arqam bin Abī'l-Arqam, 1997, 72, line 23.

مُهْفَهْفَةٌ بِيَضَاءٍ غَيْرِ مُفَاضِهِ تَرَايِبُهَا مَصْقُولَةٌ كَالسَّجَّجِلِ<sup>266</sup>

Thin-waisted, white-skinned, slender of body, her breast was/ shining like a polished mirror.

وَ كَشْحٍ لَطِيفٍ كَالجَدِيلِ مُخَضَّرٍ وَ سَاقٍ كَأَثْيَابِ السَّيِّ الْمَذَلَّلِ<sup>267</sup> ِ

Her soft, thin and flexible waist is like a leather bridle/ She is of soft, white and delicate feet like a cane under leafy branches of a palm tree.

وَ تَعْطُو بِرَخْصٍ غَيْرِ شَنْنٍ كَأَنَّهُ أُسَارِيغٌ ظَنِّي أَوْ مَسَاوِيكُ أُسْجَلِ<sup>268</sup>

She gives the things with her quite soft, not coarse, fingers. It seems her fingers/ are as soft as Zabi worms or Eshal brushes.

A picturesque pastoral scene at dusk is portrayed by him in the following terms:

فَعَنَّ لَنَا سِرْبٌ كَانَ نِعَاجُهُ عَذَارِي دَوَارٍ فِي مَلَأٍ مُذَيَّلِ<sup>269</sup>

We came face to face with a flock of wild cows whose ewe looked like maidens with long skirts going round the idol called Dawār.

It will not be out of place to mention here that in Arabic poetry, women are not infrequently compared to she cows, a tradition whose originator was none other than Imra' ul-Qays.

Horse being one of the most valuable possessions of the adventure-loving Arabs, Imra' ul-Qays, a seasoned huntsman as he was, had this to say about his courser:

رَيْرٍ كَحُدْرُوفِ الْوَالِيدِ أَمْرَهُ تَتَابَعُ كَفَيْهِ بِخَيْطٍ مُوصَلِ<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, 76, l. 31.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, 78, l. 37.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 39.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, 89, l. 63.

Fast is my steed like a top spun well by a child/ with a long and strong string.

لَهُ أَبْطَلَا ظَبْيِي وَ سَاقَا نَعَامِهِ وَ أَرْخَاءُ سِرْحَانٍ وَ تَقْرِيْبُ تَنْفَلٍ<sup>271</sup>

The waist of that horse was like that of a deer in slenderness and its shank/ was like that of an ostrich in height and it galloped like a wolf and jumped like a fox.

Here again the similes are sensory in nature and their tenor and vehicle both consist of single words which have been used by the poet to lay emphasis on the slenderness, height, running and jumping of his steed. The following two couplets are also in praise of his horse:

مَكَرَّ مَقَرَّ مُقْبِلٍ مُدْبِرٍ مَعَا كَجَلْمُودٍ صَخْرٍ حَطَّهُ السَّيْلُ مِنْ عَلٍ<sup>272</sup>

Swift to attack, to flee, to turn, yet firm as a rock/ swept down by the torrent.

كَأَنَّ عَلِيَّ الْمَتْنَيْنِ مِنْهُ إِذَا انْتَحَى مَدَاكَ عَرُوسٍ أَوْ صَلَابِيَةَ حَنْظَلٍ<sup>273</sup>

As he turns his head to a side, his soft and shining back looks like/ a bride's sweet smelling stone or like colocynth.

This brings us to the description of rain and flood which again have been depicted beautifully in the following two verses with the aid of similes:

كَأَنَّ ثَبِيرًا فِي عَرَانِينٍ وَبِلِهٍ كَبِيرٍ أَنَا فِي بَجَادٍ مُزْمَلٍ<sup>274</sup>

.At the start of the rain the Thabir Mountain looked like the head/ of the tribe draped in a striped cloak.

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<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 87, l. 58.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 59.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, 84, l. 53.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, 88, l. 61.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, 93, l. 77.

كَأَنَّ ذُرِّيَ رَأْسِ الْمُجَيْمِرِ غُدُوَّةٌ مِنَ السَّبِيلِ وَالْأَغْثَاءُ فَلَاكُهُ مِعْزَلٌ<sup>275</sup>

And the peak of the Mujaymir Mountain in the flood and rush of debris/  
looked like a whirling spindle.

How did Imra' ul-Qays visualize a thunderstorm in the desert can best be  
adjudged by reference to his own words:

أَصَاحُ تَرَى بَرْقًا أُرِيكَ وَ مِيضَهُ كَلَّمَعِ الْيَدَيْنِ فِي حَيِّ مُكَلَّلٌ<sup>276</sup>

O my friend, as we stand here mourning, do you see the lightning  
glittering like/ the flash of two moving hands amid the thick gathering  
clouds.

بُضِيءٌ سَنَاهُ أَوْ مَصَابِيحُ رَاهِبِ أَمَانَ السَّلَيْطِ بِالذَّبَالِ الْمُفْتَلِّ<sup>277</sup>

Its glory is reminiscent of the lamp of the monks when its wick/ is dipped  
thick in oil.

Only one who has encountered a thunderstorm in the desert during a  
dark, cloudy night can really appreciate the beauty of this simile

In short, Imra' ul-Qays's *Mu'allaqah* is replete with fine and ever new  
similes which he uses to great effect and appeal befitting of a great poet of  
his stature. The renowned literary critic Ibn Sallām Jūmhī (who was born at  
Basra in 139 A.H. /756 A.D and passed away, at Baghdad, in 232 A.H. /845  
A.D.), dedicates a whole chapter of his *Tabaqāt al-Shu'arā' al-Jāhiliyyah* to Imra'  
ul-Qays and while bestowing lavish encomiums on his poetic art, as far as the  
coining and apt use of similes were concerned, declares him to be the most  
pre-eminent of pre-Islamic poets.<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, 94, l. 78.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, 91, l. 70

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, 90, l. 71.

<sup>278</sup> Zayf Shauqī, *Ta'rikh-i-Adabi-i-'Arab (al-'usr al-Jāhili)*, Persian tr., 'Alīrīdā Dhakāwatī Qarāguzlū, Tehran: Amīr Kabīr Publications, 1985, 282.