

Imru'al-Qais is called the father of Arabic Poetry: A Study

Dr. Azmal Hoque

Assistant Professor & HoD
Department of Arabic
Sontali Anchalik College
Mahtoli, Kamrup, Assam, India

Abstract

Imru'al-Qays was an Arabian poet in the 6th century. He was the son of Hujr bin al-Harith who was a king that ruled over the tribes of Asad and Ghatfan and his mother was said to be Fatimah bin Rabi'ah al-Taghlibi. He is considered by many Arabic poetry scholars to be the father of Arabic poetry. His Qasidah, "Let us stop and weep" is one of the seven Mu'allaqat or Golden Odes that were hung on the walls of the Kabah. Imru'al-Qais was said to be a kind-hearted person. He always hoped for the best not only for himself but also for everyone else around him.

Keywords: Arabian, Asad, Ghatfan, Mu'allaqat, and Poet etc.

Introduction

The Present topic is to investigate for the acknowledgement of the Qsida of al-Imru'al-Qays ibn Hujr (501 AD – 544 AD) as one of the most influential Poets of Pre-Islamic Arabia for which he was called as the father of Arabic poetry. He was known as the achievement in establishing the prototype of Arabic poetry. His writings were an erotic one. His Qasida is literally known as The Muallaqat or the 'hanging' poem. The poems were written down in golden letters on scrolls of linen and hung on the walls of the Kaaba in Mecca because hanging the poem has a symbolic meaning as if the odes hang in the reader's mind.

In Pre Islamic Arabia era, people disseminated poetries verbally. Imru'al-Qays' works were collected into many different forms by various people. Arabic scholars distrust the authenticity of most of them. Imru'al-Qays is mostly known for a long, complex poem that was included in the Mu'allaqat. Imru'al-Qays' poem in Mu'allaqat contains 82 lines. He can write the most imaginative and descriptive sentences in conventional lines. Here is an example of the opening stanzas of his poetry, "The Poem of Imru'al-Qays."

Early life of Imru'al-Qais:

Historians are divided as to the year of Imru'al-Qais' birth, but one estimate is that he was born sometime around 526 AD. He was said to be the youngest of the sons of Hujr, king over the tribes of Asad and Ghutfan. Some historians have pointed out that his father had other wives and concubines than his mother, in accordance with the custom of kings at this time, and it is possible that he received little fatherly attention. He began composing poetry from an early age, an activity that his father strongly disapproved of because it was not considered appropriate for

the son of a king. Al-Tahir Ahmad Makki comments that "among the northern tribes, likewise, each tribe had its chief and its poet, and the two were hardly ever the same."

Another source of friction with his father was Imru' al-Qais' excessive dedication to lewd drinking parties and his scandalous pursuit of women. One story says that, concerned with his son's lack of responsibility, Hujr tried putting Imru' al-Qais in charge of the family's camel herds, an experiment which ended in disaster. Another story says that Hujr finally disowned his son after Imru' al-Qais publicly courted his cousin 'Unayzah, and after failing to win her hand in marriage, managed to enjoy her affections in secret, which caused a considerable scandal in the family. Yet other stories say that Imru' al-Qais may have written some lewd verses about his father's wives or concubines, and that this was the cause of their falling out. Whatever the reason, most of the stories agree that Hujr became exasperated with his son's behaviour and expelled him from his kingdom. In his exile Imru' al-Qais wandered with his group of rebellious friends from oasis to oasis, stopping to drink wine, and recite poetry, and enjoy the performance of the singing-girls, sometimes tarrying for days before packing up to wander again.

Imru' al-Qais' adventures with women also formed an important part of his early life, consisting according to some records of dozens of marriages, divorces and affairs, all ending badly for one reason or another. Imru' al-Qais' lovers feature large in his poetry, as he praises their graces, lambastes their cruelty, and laments their absence and the longing in his heart.

The Muallqat (hanging poem) of Imru' al-Qays:

The *mu'allaqat* — literally, the 'hanging ones' — are several widely renowned poems of the pre-Islamic Arabic corpus, so named because they're said to have adorned the walls of the Ka'ba, that holy religious site which, even then, was a center of widespread worship and pilgrimage. Imru' al-Qays was a 6th century warrior-poet who composed one of the *mu'allaqat*, and who, like many of his contemporaries, focused on themes relating to Arab chivalry: the seduction of woman, taming of great beasts, skill with swords and arrows, and victory in battles.

Here are the first six stanzas of the hanging poem of Imru' al-Qays, along with a short discussion.

The first six lines:

قَفَا نَبَّكَ مِنْ ذِكْرَى حَبِيبٍ وَمَنْزِلٍ / بِسِفْطِ الْوَى بَيْنَ الدَّخُولِ فَحَوْلٍ

Let's stop and cry over the memory of a lover and a place, in the drop of the valley between Dakhul and Haumal.

فَتَوَضَّحَ فَالْمُقَرَّاءُ لَمْ يَعْفُ رَسْمُهَا / لِمَا نَسَجَتْهَا مِنْ جَنُوبٍ وَشَمَالٍ

And Taudih and Mikrat. Its traces haven't been wiped out from what weaved them back and forth of the south and northern winds

نَرَى بَعَرَ الْأُرَامِ فِي عَرَصَاتِهِ / وَفَيْعَانِهَا كَأَنَّهُ حَبُّ فُلْفُلٍ

Look at antelope-dropping on its alleys, its tracts like seeds of pepper

كَأَنِّي غَدَاةَ الْبَيْتِ يَوْمَ تَحَمَّالُوا / لَدَى سَمُرَاتِ الْحَيِّ نَاقِفُ حَنْطَلٍ

As if it's only been a morning since the day they departed, and I'm at a nearby thorn tree, splitting desert gourds

وَقُفُوفًا بِهَا صَحْبِي عَلَيَّ مَطِيَّةُ / يَقُولُونَ: لَا تَهْلِكْ أَسَى وَتَجَمَّلِ

And standing near it are my companions, on their travel-animals, saying: don't suffer from sorrow, remain firm

وَأِنْ شِفَائِي عِبْرَةٌ مُهْرَاقَةٌ / فَهَلْ عِنْدَ رَسْمِ دَارِسٍ مِنْ مُعَوَّلٍ

But my healing is a matter of spilling tears, so is there a trace here from a reliable artist?

Conversation on the verses of his poems:

The form of this poem is the same as all classical Arabic poetry. Each line is the combination of two verses, each called a *bayt*. The second *bayt* ends with a *qafiyah*, or rhyme, which is repeated throughout the poem. In the *mu'allaqa* of Imru' al-Qays, the terminal rhyme is *li*: the final words of the first six lines are *haumali*, *sham'ali*, *fulfuli*, *hanzali*, *tajamali*, and *mu'awali*. These six lines represent a common theme among classical Arabic poetry, the *wuquf 'ala al-atlal*, or “standing at the ruins”. Having come across the site of his beloved's former habitation, the lovesick Arabian poet will offer a few lines in order to honor her memory and speak to the impermanence of the human condition.

What does the melancholic poet mean to say when he describes himself, in line four, as *splitting desert gourds*? A common explanation is that this fruit, which is found throughout the Arabian Peninsula and is also called colocynth, is so bitter that simply splitting it apart would cause the eyes to water. This would therefore appear to be a poetic way for Imru' al-Qays to say that he's crying.

Having tried the experiment of splitting desert gourds for himself, and noting no concurrent irritation of his eyes, he supposes that the Arabian poet was actually likening himself to a seeker of the plant's seeds, which as attested by several later Islamic physicians, were widely known for their healing effects.

So then, Imru' al-Qays is describing himself as a sick man, whose affliction, of course, is a broken heart: a heart as worn and tattered as the ruins at which he stands.

Mu'allaqat and its writers:

Mu'allaqat refers to the Suspended Odes or The Hanging Poems in Arabic. It is a collection of seven odes, each considered to be the best ode of the authors. Since all the odes were selected among the best poets in the 6th century, Mu'allaqat represents the golden era of Arabic poetry. The poems were written down in golden letters on scrolls of linen and hung on the walls of the Kaaba in Mecca because hanging the poem has a symbolic meaning as if the odes hang in the reader's mind. The collection enjoys a unique position in Arabic literature, representing the finest of early Arabic poetry.

The precise poems included in *Al-Mu'allaqāt* present another puzzle. The list usually accepted as standard was recorded by Ibn 'Abd Rabbih and names poems by Imru' al-Qays, Tarafah ibn al-'Abd, Zuhayr ibn Abī Sulmā, Labīd, 'Antarah, 'Amr ibn Kulthūm, and al-Hārith ibn Ḥilliza. Such authorities as Ibn Qutaybah, however, count 'Abid ibn al-Abras as one of the seven, while Abū 'Ubaydah replaces the last two poets of Ibn 'Abd Rabbih's list with al-Nābighah al-Dhubyānī and al-A'shā.

Literary impact on his poetry:

To this day Imru' al-Qays remains the best-known of the Pre-Islamic poets and has been a source of literary and national inspiration for Arabic intellectuals all the way into the 21st century. In his entry in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Al-Tahir Ahmad Makki says this about Imru' al-Qais:

The Prince-Poet Imru' al-Qais, of the tribe of Kinda, is the first major Arabic literary figure. Verses from his Mu'allaqah (Hanging Poems), one of seven poems prized above all others by Pre-Islamic Arabs, are still in the 20th century the most famous--and possibly the most cited--lines in all of Arabic literature. The Mu'allaqah is also an integral part of the linguistic, poetic and cultural education of all Arabic speakers. Ibn Sallam al-Jumahi (d. 846 AD) said of Imru' al-Qais in his "Generations of the Stallion Poets" (Arabic: طبقات فحول الشعراء):

Imru' al-Qais was the originator of a great many things the Arabs considered beautiful, and which were adopted by other poets. These things include calling up his companions to halt, weeping over the ruins of abandoned camp sites, describing his beloved with refinement and delicacy, and using language that was easy to understand. He was the first to compare women to gazelles and eggs, and to like horses to birds of prey and to staves. He 'hobbled like a fleeing beast' [a reference to his famous description of his horse] and separated the erotic prelude from the body of his poem. In the coining of similitudes, he surpassed everybody in his generation.

Some historians who have emphasized the historical significance of the Kindite monarchy as the first attempt to unite the central Arabian tribes before the success of Islam, and Imru' al-Qais' tragic place as one of the last Kindite princes. Others have focused on his colourful and violent life, putting it forward as an example of the

immorality and brutality which existed in pre-Islamic Arabia. Iraqi writer Madhhar al-Samarra'i (Arabic: مظهر السامرائي) in his 1993 book *Imru' al-Qais: Poet and Lover* (Arabic: (امرؤ القيس الشاعر العاشق), calls Imru' al-Qais the "poet of freedom":

Poetical status:

Makki summarizes the accounts of the biographers in identifying three older poets who Imru' al-Qais could have met and learned from. The first was Zuhayr bin Janab al-Kalbi, a well-known poet who was a friend and drinking companion of his father. It is also possible that Imru' al-Qais learned from Abu Du'ah al-Iyadi, and some accounts say that the young Imru' al-Qais was his reciter (a poet's disciple who would memorize all of his poems). A third possible poetic influence was 'Amr bin Qami'ah who was a member of his father's retinue, and was said to have later joined Imru' al-Qais' retinue and accompanied him until his death.

Young Imru' al-Qays ibn Hujr:

Ameru' al-Qays, or Imru'u al Quais, Ibn Hujr Al-Kindi, Arabic (امرؤ القيس بن حجر بن الحارث الكندي), was a celebrated pre-Islamic Arabian poet of the sixth century, circa 500-535 C.E. and the author of one of the *Muallaqat*, an anthology of Arabic literature attributed to seven famous poets.

According to Al-Asma'ee, he is Imru al Qais ibn Hujr ibn Haris ibn 'Amr ibn Hujr ibn Mu'awiyah ibn Thawr. His mother was Fatima bint Rabee'ah bint Harith ibn Zuhair, the sister of Kulaib and Muhallil ibn Rabee'a the Ta'labi'een. It is also claimed that his mother was Tamlik bint Amr. He was known as 'Malik ad-Dilleel' the lost king, as he could never regain the lost kingdom of his father, who was one of the kings of Kindah.

The most widespread account of his story suggests that Imru' al-Qays ibn Hujr is the youngest son of Hujr, the king of the Kindah tribe of central Arabia. Kindah is part of the present Republic of Yemen. When Imru' al-Qays was young, he was famous for writing erotic poetry, which expelled him from his father's house. He is one of the seven poets in the famous collection of pre-Islamic poetry, *Mu'allaqat*. The poet Imru' al-Qais had a gentle heart and a sensitive soul. He wanted the best not only for himself but for all the people of his society. The freedom that he struggled for was not confined to the romantic and erotic relations between him and his beloved Fatimah, and was not limited to his demands to lift the restrictions on sexual relations between men and women, but exceeded all this, so that he was singing for the freedom of all mankind-- and from this point we are able to name him, the Poet of Freedom.

Killing of Imru' al-Qays:

Hujr instructed his servant to murder his son and bring back his eyes as evidence. However, the servant did not kill Imru' al-Qays but an antelope instead. He brought back the eyes of the antelope to prove that he had already executed the order.

Hujr later felt remorse for his actions after his son returned to the house. However, Imru al-Qays was kicked out again by his father. This time he lived a prodigal life, vagabonding in the desert with a band of companions, devoting himself to the hunting, drinking, gambling, and women.

Revenge of his father Hujr:

In 525 A.D. Yemen was occupied by the Negus (Emperor) of Axum (modern day Ethiopia). With their sponsor destroyed, the Kingdom of Kinda quickly fell apart. It is probably during this period that the tribe of Asad rebelled and killed Imru' al-Qais' father, Hujr.

Imru' al-Qays remained in a licentious lifestyle until the news of Hujr's death reached him. His father was killed in light of the feuds with a rebellious clan, Banu Asad. But Imru' al-Qays did not feel sorrow on the day he heard about his father's death, and he decided to roister one more day and said one of the most famous quotes, "Wine today, business tomorrow!"

King Imru' al-Qays

After that day, Imru' al-Qays devoted himself to vengeance for his father and, "Wine and women are forbidden to me until I have killed a hundred of the Banu Asad and cut the forelocks of a hundred more!"

He then said,

الخمر علي حرام والنساء حتى أقتل من بني أسد مائة وأجز نواصي مائة

Alcohol is forbidden for me, and so is a woman until I kill from Bani Asad a hundred and I cut of the foreheads of a hundred.

He is also reported to have said,

ضئعني صغيرا وحملني دمه كبيرا. لا صحو اليوم ولا سُكْر غدا. اليوم خمرٌ وغدا أمرٌ.

He (my father) let me get away when I was young and made me carry the burden of revenge for his blood when I was older. No sobriety today and no intoxication tomorrow. Today shall be drink and tomorrow shall be a great matter!

And then he got drunk. When he was awake and sober again, he swore not eat meat, or to drink alcohol or use oil on his body, or have sexual relations with a woman or wash his head from Janaba (impurity until he gets revenge for his father).

Later, he successfully enlists the help of the tribes of Bakr and Thaghib and kills many from Banu Asad. And the people of Bakr and Thaghib told him that he has gotten his revenge and the fighting should stop. Imru al Qais refused. He then wanders across the Arabian Peninsula looking for the help of various tribes to help him wage his war and regain his lost kingdom.

The Death of Imru' al-Qays ibn Hujr:

For the rest of his life, Imru' al-Qays successfully caused heavy casualties on the Banu Asad with help from other tribes. During his search for allies, he met King al-Hārith of Ghassān, who later introduced Imru' al-Qays to the Byzantine emperor Justinian I. In the beginning, Justinian I agreed to supply Imru al-Qays with an army to avenge his father's assassination and regain his kingdom. However, rumors that he had seduced Justinian's daughter prompted the emperor to send the poet a poisoned cloak. After Imru al-Qays put on the cloak, his body broke out in sores and died.

However, most historians downplay the likelihood of this account, in favour of the story that Imru' al-Qais actually died from a chronic skin disease, a disease which he mentioned in one of his poems.

The best estimates of the years of Imru' al-Qais' embassy to Justinian and death in Anatolia (near the city of Ankara in modern-day Turkey) are from 561 to 565 AD. It has been said that after the death of Imru' al-Qais the Greeks made a statue of him on his tomb that was still seen in 1262 AD, and that his tomb is nowadays located in Hızırlık, Ankara.

Conclusion:

From the above tremendous discussion we may come to a great conclusion that Imru' al-Qais is famously known to compose erotic poems that relate to his actual lifestyle: he was nicknamed, “the playboy” for his multiple sexual encounters with several different women that he has mentioned about in his poems. Imru' al-Qais was said to be a kind-hearted person. He always hoped for the best not only for himself but also for everyone else around him. He used his poems to express his demands on allowing sexual relations between men and women. He did not compose poems for his own benefit but for the benefit for all of mankind and so he received the title of the Poet of Freedom from the Iraqi writer Madhhar al-Samarra'i (Mazhar, 1993). The poetic devices and styles used by Imru al Qais were not unique to him, but he is often referred to as the father of Arabic poetry as he is said to have invented many of these styles which others imitated after him. As Imru al Qays was a free thinker he has successfully able to focused all of his feelings in his amatory verses.

The odes of *Al-Mu'allaqāt* are all in the classical *qaṣīdah* pattern, which some Arab scholars believed to have been created by Imru' al-Qays. After a conventional prelude, the *nasīb*, in which the poet calls to mind the memory of a former love, most of the rest of the ode consists of a succession of movements that describe the poet's horse or camel, scenes of desert events, and other aspects of Bedouin life and warfare. The main theme of the *qaṣīdah* (the *madīḥ*, or panegyric, the poet's tribute to himself, his tribe, or his patron) is often disguised in these vivid descriptive passages, which are the chief glory of *Al-Mu'allaqāt*. Their vivid imagery, exact observation, and deep feeling of intimacy with nature in the Arabian Desert contribute to *Al-Mu'allaqāt*'s standing as a masterpiece of world literature. The lively description of a desert storm at the end of Imru' al-Qays's *qaṣīdah* is a splendid example of such passages.

However, it should not be thought that the poems of *Al-Mu'allaqāt* are merely naturalistic or romantic descriptions of Bedouin life: their language and imagery embody a complex system of ethical values passed from generation to generation through the poetry.

References:

- "A Note on the Poet: Imru' al-Qais" [Arabic: نبذة على الشاعر: امرؤ القيس]. almoallaqat.com. Web.
- al-Samarra'i, Mazhar. Imru' al-Qais: Poet and Lover [Arabic: امرؤ القيس: الشاعر العاشق]. Amman, Jordan: Dar al-Ibda', 1993. Print.
- al-Qays, Imru' and Charles Greville Tuetey. *Imrulkais of Kinda, Poet, Circa A.D. 500-535: The Poems, the Life, and the Background*. London: Diploma Press, 1977. ISBN 9780860150305
- "Imru al Qais - Excerpts from Kitab al-Aghani of Abu al-Faraj al-Asfahani" Fluent Arabic Blog. fluentarabic.net. Web.
- Johnson, F. E. (translator). *The Hanged Poems*. Sacred Books of the East, (ed Horne, Charles F) NY: Parke, Austin & Lipscomb, 1917. The Hanged Poems Retrieved February 9, 2008.
- Levin, G. 2006. "The Mua`Llaqa of Imru Al-Qays (Poem)." *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*. 29: 1-5.
- Mostyn, Trevor. *Censorship in Islamic Societies*. London: Saqi, 2002. ISBN 0863560415
- Makki, al-Tahir Ahmad. "Imru' al-Qays." Dictionary of Literary Biography. Ed. Cooperson, Michael and Toorawa, Shawkat. Vol. 311. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005. Print.
- Mumayiz, Ibrahim. 2005. "Imru' Al-Qays and Byzantium." *Journal of Arabic Literature*. 36, no. 2: 135-151.