

The Portrayal of Outsiders in the Works of Arab Poets of the Abbasid Era (Case Study: Portrayal of Pre-Islamic Iranians)

Sakineh Mohebkah¹

PhD Candidate of Arabic Language and Literature, University of Kashan, Kashan, Iran

Dr.Hosein Imanian

Assistant Professor of Arabic Language and Literature, University of Kashan, Kashan, Iran

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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction

The religious, historical, and political links between Arabs and Iranians could be observed and thoroughly explored through various dimensions, and there has also been many works written in this area. These links as well as a bilateral influence could clearly be seen in many religious and literary fields. The image of historical and legendary Iran in Arabic literature, whether in poetry or prose, is considered as one of these signs, which clearly asserts the cultural, social, and political role and dominance of Iran before Islam, especially during the Sassanid era, over the cultural and political outlook of Muslims during the first centuries.

2. Theoretical Framework

The names of Iranian characters could be seen all throughout the works of Arab poets during the Abbasid era. Naturally, these characters have been portrayed positively in the works of patriotic Iranian poets; however, since these characters are also portrayed positively in the poetry of Arab poets who are devoid of any patriotic feelings for Iran, the subject appears to require a different, more precise investigation. Given how an Arab poet having no Iranian origin calls on such Iranian names with different religion and nationality, it is essential to examine why and how these poets would portray these outsiders; is it due to personal motives? Or is it the result of collective, all-inclusive motivations leading these poets to create such works? Here the majestic, glorious portrayal of Iranian characters before Islam through the words of patriotic Iranians as well as their negative, undermined portrayal in the poetry of biased Arabs are irrelevant. What is presented here is a generally positive image of Iranian outsider figures offered by Arab poets of the post-Islamic eras, particularly the Abbasid period.

1. Corresponding author. Email : smoheby@yahoo.com

3. Method

The present inquiry was conducted through the descriptive-analytical and statistical methods. In this regard, following the extraction of poems in which Iranian characters before Islam are mentioned, it is attempted to examine and analyze the portrayal of these Iranian outsiders. Then, using the statistical method, these figures along with their period were classified. Given how the study inevitably requires referring to historical reports, the approach for this study is historical-literary.

4. Results and Discussion

The sociopolitical challenges between Iranians and Arabs during the first centuries have been demonstrated rather inconspicuously, while Arab poets and scholars often praised Iranians and their prominent figures. Not only the image of outsiders is not omitted in the Arabic poetry of the Abbasid era, but also it is manifested in a glorious manner. Here, it could be understood that the implications on being the enemies of Iran during the early centuries have been nothing but a disadvantageous, failing advertisement, whereas Arab poets and people had believed and accepted Iranian outsiders before Islam. For instance, by looking at books written during the early Hijra centuries under the title of “*Al-Mathaleb*” in which the shortcomings of nationalities, including Iranians, Arabs, Turks, and Romans, are presented, it could be observed how they are incompatible with the image of these nations portrayed in Arabic and Persian poems.

5. Conclusion

On one hand, the examination of motives and reasons for the presence of pre-Islamic Iranian figures in Arabic poetry of early centuries shows the extent to which the Iranian heritage before Islam had remained known to Arabs and Arab Muslims; on the other hand, it denotes the importance and value of this heritage during the first centuries of Islam. The majority of these figures are of historical nature (religious and political), who have been listed amongst mythical, artistic figures of ancient Iran. This is easy to understand considering how Islamic rulers, particularly during the Abbasid period, have attempted to follow the conventions of Sassanid Kings in their approach for governance. Consequently, everyone including poets who were considered as the intellectuals of the society were fairly familiar with such figures. In this regard, there have been a number of books translated from Pahlavi into Arabic. Nevertheless, the familiarity between Muslims and Iranian religious figures has been clearly insignificant in terms of religious aspects, whether willingly or unwillingly. As this society had apparently rejected Iranian religious conventions, it had neither a compromising response to Manichaeists, Mazdakists nor even to Zoroastrianists. Seemingly, a few number of these people are from the Sassanid, Parthian or Achaemenid empires. The Sassanid, who regarded themselves as superior over previous reigns due to perhaps reasons such as the history of this dynasty and its magnitude for the Muslims of early centuries, have been portrayed more prominently compared to other Iranian rulers before Islam.

Keywords: Iconology, Calling, Iran before Islam, I and Others, Arabic poetry of the Abbasid Era

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