



## Religious and Political Satire: An Analysis of some Arab Satiric poets

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to trace the reflection of the cultural elements in the poetry of some major Arab poets of satire, and the way the difference in periods and cultures affects the subjects and methods of satire. The Arab poets chosen are: Al-Hutay'ah (?), Al-Farazdaq (c. 20- c. 114 A.H.; c. 641- c. 732 A.D.), Jarir (c. 33- c. 114 A.H.; c. 653- c. 732 A.D.), Al-Akhtal (c. 20- 92 A.H.; c. 641- c. 710 A.D.), Bashir Ibn Burd (96-168 A.H.; 714-784 A.D.), and Ibn ul-Rumi (221- 284 A.H.; 835-897 A.D.).

### Keywords:

Satire, Religious Satire, Political Satire, Satire, Arab Satiric poets.

### Introduction

Satire is one of the oldest types of literature, which is closely related to the affairs and transactions of humankind. It is an authentic reflection of the cultural milieu which has produced it. Poets of different periods and nations have utilised satire for different purposes, but their common denominator has always been the earnest concern for defending and establishing cultural standards and norms. The various aspects of culture, social, religious, and political, have been the major domains for satiric poets, and the changes in the cultural outlook in these aspects inspired different subjects and methods in satire from one age to another.

The satiric impulse has existed in man's consciousness from the earliest times, but the satiric expressions have been directed through different channels and moulded in various forms and techniques. Satire, therefore, is a complex literary issue, and no satisfactory and strict definition can be worked out to pin down the mercurial term 'satire'. The Encyclopedia

Britannica defines satire as an "artistic form, chiefly literary and dramatic, in which human or individual vices, follies, abuses, or shortcomings are held up to ridicule, derision, burlesque, irony, or other methods sometimes with an intent to bring about improvement" (Encyclopedia Britannica), adding that the word is full of complexities, since it "signifies, on one hand, a kind of literature...and, on the other, a mocking spirit or tone that manifests itself in many literary genres but can also enter into almost any kind of human communication" (Ibdi). The desire to attack others, who are regarded as evil threats to man's existence, is as old as human nature itself.

### Religious and Political Satire in Arabic Poetry

The Arabs in the Jahiliyah period lived a free and libertine life, very far from any religious curbs and principles. No religious creeds engendered disputes and battles. The incessant wars were the outcome of economic and tribal competitions and feuds. Politics, in

the sense of ideological beliefs and practices, was not known in the Jahiliyah mentality. Their poetry, as a result, did not contain any significant religious and political satire. With the appearance of Islam, the tribal affiliation and economic struggle gave way to a new religious ideology which shaped the political system of the new state in Arabia.

The Holy Koran presented a new kind of satire, which depends not on the Jahiliyah values of shaming the victim on cowardice, obscure parentage, or failing to take revenge, but on disbelief, straying away from the right path, and short-sightedness. In Surat al-Masad (The Plaited Rope), for example, the Koran attacks Abu Lahab, one of Prophet Muhammad's uncles, and his wife in these words:

1. *Perish the hands of the Father of Flame, Perish he!*
2. *No profit to him from all his wealth, and all his gain.*
3. *Burnt soon will he be in a Fire of blazing flame!*
4. *His wife shall carry the (crackling) wood—as fuel!—*
5. *A twisted rope of palm leaf around her (own) neck!* (Ali, pp. 1-5).

In Surat al-Munafiqun (the Hypocrites), the Holy Koran pictures the hypocrites as liars and unbelievers who go astray from the right path of Allah:

1. When the Hypocrites come to thee, they say, "We bear witness that thou art indeed the Messenger of Allah." Yea, Allah knoweth that thou art indeed his Messenger, and Allah beareth witness that the Hypocrites are indeed liars.
2. They have made their oaths a screen (for their misdeeds): thus they obstruct (men) from the Path of Allah: Truly evil are their deeds

Al-Hutay'ah borrowed some Islamic concepts in one of his poems, written in the time of defection, but retains the Jahiliyah spirit of boasting and praising the strength of warriors at battle. The political-religious dichotomy became sharper in the Umayyad period, where the struggle for power intensified. After the murder of the Caliph

Uthman Bin Affan (656 A.D.), the Muslims were divided into two major political-religious parties: the Umayyads and the Alawis. Satire gained a very important role in the war between these parties; it was their media, as it were, that helped in spreading their opinions and 'shaming' their opponents. In this period appeared the 'Naqa'id', or flytings, especially between Jarir and his rivals, Al-Farazdaq and Al-Akhtal. These flytings were encouraged by the Umayyad party, and used as a political means to keep the public opinion in Iraq, the centre of the political opposition, busy listening to those daily flytings and thus diverting the people from political ambition (Ismail, p. 349).

The struggle between the two main parties arose from a difference in opinion over the conception of the caliphate. The Umayyad party believed that the caliphate should be restricted to Umayyah's progeny, who were regarded as the true and rightful successors. The Shiite party, on the other hand, were of the opinion that the legitimate caliph was Ali Bin Abi Talib, and that the caliphate should be handed down to his sons from Fatima, the daughter of Prophet Muhammad. Their conception of the caliphate was that it was a divine order given to the family of the prophet (i.e. his progeny from the Ali-Fatima union.)

Al-Farazdaq's political affiliation was fluctuating, and his satires are directed mainly against the Umayyad governors, who were frequently substituted according to the caliph's wishes or the states' political and military needs, or against some literary rivals. In one of his poems he satirizes Yazid b. al-Muhallab, who was defeated in battle by one Maslamah:

*Look at Allah's destruction, which struck Ibn al-Muhallab, for Allah is revengeful.*

*He [Maslamah] led the horses from al-Balqa, running for a month, troubling you with [the sound of] the halter and the reigns.*

*When they saw that Allah's fate has befallen them, and they became like ostriches going astray,*

*Only their houses remained in sight, as if they were the stone [people of] Thamud or Arm (Al-Farazdaq, p. 236).*

In these lines al-Farazdaq describes Ibn al-Muhallab and his people's cowardice and flight in battle, using images taken from the Holy Koran. The attributes of valour and bravery, which he ascribes to Maslamah and his army, and the opposite features attached to the other party, are those of the Jahiliyah period. But al-Farazdaq incorporates images taken from the Holy Koran, comparing the people of Ibn al-Muhallab to the people of Thamud, who "used to carve out homes in the mountains" (The Holy Koran: 7, 74), and who did not believe in Salih, the messenger of Allah, and did not obey Allah's orders, so they were destroyed by an earthquake:

*((So the earthquake took them unawares, and they lay prostrate in their homes in the morning))*

(The Holy Koran: 7, 78).

Elsewhere they are described in these terms:

*((Then see what was the end of their plot!—this, that we destroyed them and their people, all (of them)))*.

*((Now such were their houses—in utter ruin—because they practiced wrongdoing))*

(The Holy Koran: 27, 51-2).

Al-Farazdaq also compares the people of Ibn al-Muhallab to the city of Arm, which was also destroyed by Allah:

*((Seest thou how thy Lord dealt with the Ad (people)—*

*Of the (city of) Arm, with lofty pillars,*

*The like of which were not produced in (all) the land? ))*

(The Holy Koran: 89, 6-8).

In another poem al-Farazdaq satirizes the tribe of Tayi' for their deviation from the teachings of Islam. He pictures the people of this tribe as small and weak, showing no respect and adherence to the Islamic values:

If a sparrow stretched its wing on Tay'i in their dwelling places, it will be shaded.

I asked the Muslim pilgrims and did not find any slaughtered sheep endowed to the pilgrims by a Ta'i.

The reference to the sacred ritual of pilgrimage to Mecca and the necessary rite of slaughtering a sheep during that ritual, and the mention of the prayer and the mosque, all were

new concepts and habits in the Arab culture, introduced by Islam. In another poem, al-Farazdaq compares his satires against Jarir to necklaces from hell:

*I adorned Banu Kulaib's fool [Jarir] with necklaces that will remain in tales, Necklaces that are not (made) of gold, but well-baked markers from hell. (p. 45)*

Al-Farazdaq also compares Jarir to Thamud's she-camel, which was the cause of their destruction:

*Jarir brought disgrace on Kulaib, and did not protect [their] honour,*

*He was to them as Thamud's camel, which grumbled at noon, and destroyed them completely. (p. 74)*

Al-Farazdaq means that Jarir's attacks brought about his retaliation, which destroyed Jarir's tribe, as Thamud's camel to her people. This kind of sarcastic and humorous image is original; it was "very rare in the poetry of old poets, who aimed their arrows against the bad conduct, but it became abundant in the Naqa'id" (al-Fahham, p. 313). Al-Farazdaq's dissatisfaction with the Umayyad caliph is also shown in his attack against the caliph's agent Al-Hajjaj b. Yusuf al-Thaqafi, the governor of Wasit. Al-Farazdaq describes Al-Hajjaj and his followers as impious renegades who are defeated in battle, and sent to hell when killed:

*If you do not say that you are unbelievers, you will stumble during the day and will not be forgiven.*

*Your heads are cut with a strike that quickly reaches the shoulders,*

*Even if you have prayed for eighty pilgrimages [years], and fasted, and made your bodies of clean attributes.*

*If Al-Hajjaj's people, Al-Mu'tib, confront an army that destroyed the enemy,*

*Their living will become subservient, and their dead will be in hell, with grim appearances. (p. 175)*

In a poem in which Al-Farazdaq attacks Jarir, Al-Farazdaq mixes the Jahiliyah habit of slandering a person with his lowly parentage, and the new way of belittling others by describing them as unbelievers in Islam:

*Oh, son of Al-Maragha, you are the meanest of those who walk, and the most servile of those whose fingers have nails.*

*If you mention your father or his days, he disgraces you where the stones are kissed. (p. 91)*

Jarir also replied in the same manner, using the new codes of spiritual belief brought by Islam. In one of his poems he attacks Al-Farazdaq by accusing him of apostasy and fluctuating from one religion to the other:

*In their Feast, the Christians love you, and on Saturday the Jews become your sect.*

*If you are stoned, it is due to the law, and the fate of Thamud befalls you.*

(Jarir, p. 127).

Jarir (p. 65) refers to the punishment of stoning the apostate, which was legislated by Islam. In another poem he repeats his attack against Al-Farazdaq by describing him as an unclean person because of his relations with the Christians and his eating the flesh of the pig:

Al-Farazdaq is dirt when he enters the mosque, and his cleanness is not true cleanness.

Al-Farazdaq's group is from Taghlib's Christians, and if he claims that this is untrue, then his claim is false. Pay homage to the cross and bring your oblation, and take your share of pork. (p. 149)

Jarir repeats the same terms of attack elsewhere, priding himself on his being a true Muslim, whereas Al-Farazdaq has inclinations toward Christianity:

Al-Farazdaq has joined the Christians to assist them, but he is capable of no assistance. He prostrates himself to the cross, while our arrow has won, and so we are the best. (p. 182)

Jarir is not proud of his tribe or parentage, as the Jahiliyah poets were, but of his strong faith. These accusations against Al-Farazdaq as having 'strong ties' with the Christians stemmed from his friendship with the Christian poet Al-Akhtal, who also had skirmishes with Jarir. In his attacks against Al-Akhtal, Jarir criticizes Al-Akhtal for being a Christian, showing the features and rituals that

Islam renounced as signs of disbelief and cause for punishment in the afterlife:

Their living are most evil, and meanest, and the ground throws out their dead when buried. Dirt is where they pray, and their call to prayer is tolling the bells, as they know not what the [Koran] suras are (p. 199).

Jarir also slights Al-Akhtal by mentioning the subjection of his tribe, Taghlib, by the Umayyads. Jarir mixes the Jahiliyah habit of bragging the superiority of their tribe's power and domination, and the new pride the Muslims acquired of having the attribute of being 'believers and leaders':

Al-Ukhaitil (p. 59) was born by women from Taghlib, who are impure women, fed by impure food.

That Who deprived Taghlib from the good deeds has made the Prophethood and the caliphate in us.

Do you possess any [of our] rites, or hear anybody calling you to prayer?

Mudar is my father, and the father of kings, do you have a father like ours, you pigs of Taghlib?

This is my cousin, a Caliph at Damascus, who will, if I wish, drive you as slaves for me. (pp. 476-7)

Al-Akhtal, on the other hand, was not able to answer Jarir by satirizing the Islamic values and rituals, since he was living in the Muslim state, and earning his bread from being a favourite poet in the caliph's court. Al-Akhtal was the poet of the state and the spokesman of the Caliphate, but there was a difference in religion between him and the state and Caliphate, and in his art he had to be loyal either to his religion or his bread-giver. He was...clever enough to choose the latter, and overlook the former, to keep his status, power, and source of living (Qabawa, p. 260).

But in a few lines he attacks Islam, saying that he will never become a Muslim, since this would prevent him from drinking wine. He said these lines when the Caliph Abd-al-Malik b. Marwan asked him to convert to Islam.

Since Al-Akhtal lived in an Islamic community, in his satire he had to appeal to the

codes of the culture that surrounded him. That is why his attacks against his rivals are based on Islamic concepts, although he was Christian. In his satire against the tribe of Asad, Al-Akhtal describes the people of this tribe as vacillating, driven by penury and hunger to pretend that they entered Islam, while in reality the new religion did not touch their hearts and minds:

The sons of Asad are two legs: one leg is hesitating, and the other has been added to us by hardships.

You did not try [to understand] the religion, but were obliged to [enter] the religion by hunger, which is unsleeping and does not shut its eyes (Al-Akhtal, p. 467).

In another poem Al-Akhtal attacks the people of the tribe of Abs, saying that these people are not true Muslims, that is why nobody prays on their dead, and the ground will not receive their bodies. He adds that these people are more ignorant than animals:

Nobody prays on their dead, and Allah's ground will not accept those whom they bury.

When they make their sacrificed sheep kneel down, then they are more straying than the animals they slaughter. (p. 466)

Al-Akhtal also cites the Holy Koran when he refers to the story of Allah's destruction of Thamud by the use of a camel. Al-Akhtal says that when Allah saw that the people of Amir having no wise men who would restrain their people from treachery, He sent the tribe of Taghlib, Al-Akhtal's tribe, to be the cause of their punishment, as the camel was to Thamud:

When the Most Gracious One saw that there was no prudent man amongst them, and no one to prohibit his brother from treachery,

He sent them Taghlib, the sons of Wa'il, who were to them as that which grumbled at Thamud. (p. 430)

Gradually the religious concepts and values deepened in the social consciousness, becoming standards to measure people's goodness and righteousness. To satirize a man one could easily deprive him of the approved Islamic features and assign to him whatever 'abhorrent' and unacceptable attributes imaginable. That is the method Bashar Ibn

Burd follows in his attacks against his rival, the poet Hammad Ajrad. In one of his poems, Bashar accuses Hammad of 'idolatry' and hypocrisy, describing him as a Persian worshipping the head of his idol, while pretending to be a follower and lover of Prophet Muhammad:

*When the wine-servers bring their pitcher [of wine], you fall prostrate to their pitcher.*

*And you worship a head, for which you pray, while you do not worship God.*

*You show [your] love of the prophet of righteousness, whereas you profess your disbelief in him.*

*You worship another God on the month of fasting eve, regarding that as a legal act, as the malicious snake does.*

(Ibn Burd, p. 412).

In some other lines Bashar satirises Hammad for not doing his prayers and for drinking wine:

Had he known his God and done his prayers regularly, Hammad would have been a righteous follow.

His face has become white from drinking wine, but its whiteness will be blackness on the Judgment Day. (p. 439)

The contrasts and antitheses used in these lines enhance the cool and easy-going sarcasm that deepens and sharpens the satirical touch. One day Bashar got angry with someone called Abu Zaid, and composed few lines accusing him of committing adultery on the Al-Qadr Eve, which is the holiest eve in Islam, in which the Holy Koran was revealed to Prophet Muhammad. Bashar appeals to the most sensitive aspects in Islamic culture: the most sacred aspect, the Al-Qadr Eve, and the most atrocious one, adultery:

[Be informed that] Abu Zaid committed adultery on the Al-Qadr Eve,

And did not respect the inviolability of the month [Ramadan], may Allah my God be exalted. (p. 526)

Ibn ul-Rumi attacks one of his victims, called Al-Baihaqi, by attributing to him the

charge of polytheism, and describing him as a Mesdaic<sup>1</sup>:

"Baihaqi, Mesdaic, unbeliever in Allah, and a polytheist" (Ibn ul-Rumi, p. 600). This kind of satire reflects the influence of Persian culture on the Arab society, since Persia was the land of various religions and creeds, which poets seized and used to describe their victims and make them appear as unbelievers and apostates. Because poets always tried to 'stain' their rivals with the most abhorrent and dangerous charges, they found the charge of 'unbelief and heresy' an influential weapon, "since the poet knew more than others the danger of such a charge and what it might entail on the one satirized" (Al-Tamimi, p. 193).

In another poem, Ibn ul-Rumi attacks mean people by saying that anyone who praises them will get the pagans' reward, which is, from an Islamic point of view, hell: "Leave the mean, for their praise reward is only the reward of the worshipper of idols" (Ibn ul-Rumi, p. 543). One of Ibn ul-Rumi's severest attacks is against a certain muezzin (the person who summons Muslims to prayer) called Dabs. Ibn ul-Rumi refers to the religions of Persia, and to Christianity, ironically preferring them to doing the Muslim's prayer, simply because of Dabs's voice:

*If I pray like the Persians  
For God and the stars and the suns' eye,  
Or pray behind a parson  
Whose prayer is glorifying the Holy Spirit,  
Is better for me than praying the five prayers  
behind young camels [summoned] by Dabs's call  
for prayer. (p. 321)*

Ibn ul-Rumi has a keen eye for the "shortcomings and defects of people.... He was fond of ugliness and searched for it to delight with" (Al-Hawi, p. 43). He regards the long beard as a sign of ugliness, and satirises long-bearded men in many of his poems. In one of

<sup>1</sup> Mesdaim is a form of Zoroastrianism, a religion found in Persia by Zoroaster, who "instituted the caste of magus and founded a religion based on the belief that good and evil are absolutes. They are represented by the gods Ormazd and Ahriman who are engaged in constant warfare." Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus.

these poems, Ibn ul-Rumi refers to a saying of Prophet Muhammad's, in which the prophet advises Muslims to trim the moustaches and leave beards to grow long. Ibn ul-Rumi severely criticises a certain man for his long beard, which is regarded as a sign of religious righteousness, while Ibn ul-Rumi sees it as a sign of ugliness:

*A beard which has been neglected, so it flowed  
and abounded, to which all hands point.  
Whenever a beholder's eye glimpses it, he  
immediately exclaims "God is Great!",  
And is filled with fear, which fills not even that  
who sees the faces of Munkar and Nakir.  
(Munkar and Nakeer, p. 3)  
So, fear God the Almighty and change some  
abomination in you that can be changed.  
Or shorten it, for it is enough to have half a span  
of hand as a reminder.  
If the Prophet had seen one like it, he would have  
ordered people to shorten beards, and preferred  
shaving beards to letting them overflow. (p.  
222)*

Although Ibn ul-Rumi was not an outward Shiite, his political inclination was toward the Alawis, and was dissatisfied with the Abbasids' persecution of the Shiites. In many poems Ibn ul-Rumi expressed his objection to the Abbasid caliphs' tyranny and oppression of the Shiites, and openly satirized those caliphs as 'renegades' and 'usurpers' of the caliphate. In 250 A.H., in the time of the Abbasid caliph Al-Musta'in, one of the Alawi prominent figures, named Abu Al-Hussein Yahya Bin Umar Al-Alawi, revolted against the Abbasids, but was defeated and killed near Al-Kufa. This incident left a saddening and regretful feeling in Ibn ul-Rumi, who attacked the Abbasids severely in his poetry. In one of his poems, Ibn ul-Rumi describes the Abbasids as the 'crooked way' as opposed to the 'straightforward way', which refers to the Alawis:

Look before you and decide what way you follow, [there are] two different ways: a straightforward and a crooked. (p. 600)

Ibn ul-Rumi eulogizes Yahya and all the Shiite martyrs, and attacks the Abbasids by saying that they have done wrong to Prophet

Muhammad, which will bring dishonour and shame on them:

*You, who rejoice at his death, a non-dispelled distress will befall you.*

*Are you all satisfied in your beds, that the Messenger of Allah is disturbed in his grave?*

*Do not rejoice at his mischief, fie on every one of you, whose face is blackened.* (p. 602)

Ibn ul-Rumi goes on his attack to describe the Abbasids as tyrants and aberrant. He also adds his sarcastic touches in comparing between the Abbasids and the Alawis, saying that the Abbasids are fat and satiated, whereas the Alawis are thin and starving:

*Is it fair that they enter into evening with thin bellies, while every one of you is about to blow his belly with surfeit?*

*You walk swaggering in your rooms, with heavy steps and shaking rumps.*

*Their newborn is starving, while your newborn is fat and thick-boned.* (p. 605)

In another poem, Ibn ul-Rumi satirizes the Abbasid would-be caliph Al-Mu'taz for fighting Al-Musta'in in 251 A.H., to seize power. Al-Mu'taz had been forced to disown his right for the caliphate by his brother Al-Muntasir. When Al-Muntasir died, his cousin Al-Musta'in was proclaimed caliphate, but Al-Mu'taz claimed it for himself and fought his cousin. Ibn ul-Rumi satirized him in these lines:

*Al-Mu'taz, leave the caliphate from a short distance, for Allah will not put it on you after taking it away.*

*Are you expecting to put it on after been disowned? How far, how far, the udder has been milked.*

*By Allah, the Owner [of the universe] would not be satisfied to grant it to you even before what you have committed.* (p. 128)

Contentions in the religious and political arena produce satirical works that aim at explaining and defending creeds and ideologies. The attacks are directed against religious sects, who are mostly involved in political matters, in order to weaken their beliefs and belittle their stature. In Restoration England, after a period of armed struggle, the various warring sects adopted polemic

argumentation to defend their points of view and undermine their opponents'. Dryden saw in the various opposing religious factions threats to the established order, especially the divine right of kings and the constitution that was sanctioned by history. Pope and Johnson were deeply resentful of the new political system, and attacked the corruption of Walpole's administration and the monarch. Byron criticized the British Government for being a symbol of tyranny and oppression. He believed that the British monarch did not represent the personality of a true leader.

The Arabs composed religio-political satire when Islam was established as a domineering creed and laid the foundations of a true government system. The Holy Koran provided poets with new images and subjects for satire. The conflicting religio-political ideologies that arose among Muslims supplied satirists with rich and fertile topics, and satirists were not slow in responding to such varying circumstances.

### Conclusion

Satire is a significant cultural document that registers the unembellished reality of people. Satirists engage in satirical debates on various levels: personal, social, moral, religious, and political. The religio-political satire flourished in Arabic only after the formation of the religiously based state which enjoyed a developed and well-organised political system. Poets borrowed images and material from the Holy Koran to enrich their imagery and subject-matter. These poets also voiced the conflicting ideological views that arose when the Muslim state enlarged and ramified.

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