The Mu‘allaqah of Imru al-Qays and its Structural Analyses

TENGKU GHANI BIN TENGKU JUSOH

INTRODUCTION

This poem is written by Imru al-Qays bin Hujur al-Kindi, who lived forty years before the prophet Mohammad. And he is also called al-Malik ul-Zillel (the much-erring king), on account of his amorous tendencies. He fell in love with Unaizah, the daughter of his uncle Sherhabeel and of these two beloveds there is an erotic section which a poet reflects in the poem.

My aim throughout has been to present a critical examination of the poem in a manner which would be readily accessible to anyone interested and also to provide the reader with a brief analysis of how the poem develops structurally. My intention is to commit myself in a manner that can be easily avoided when one simply translates a pre-Islamic poem. I consider these two methods of approaching a qasidah to be mutually inclusive, each complementing the other and enabling the reader fully to evaluate the poem in question in a way that a translation does not by paring the odes to the barest essentials the poet’s concern and themes emerge with succinct precision.

AL-MU‘ALLAQAH

فَقَفَا نِبِكُ مِن ذَكْرِي حَبِيبٍ وَمَرَّلٍ بِسَفَطِ النَّزَعِ بَيْنَ الدَّخُولِ فَحَوِّلِ

Stop! Let us cry at the remembrance of a beloved and her lodgings at the extremity of winding sand between al-Dakhlul and Hawmal.

فَتَوَضَّحَ فَلَقِّرَا مَّعَ رَسْمُهَا لَمْ يَعْفُ رَسْمُهَا لَا نَسِبُهَا مِنْ جِنْبٍ وَشَمَالٍ

And Tüdhul and al-Miqrah; its traces have not been erased by what has streaked it of south wind and the north wind.

تَرِى بِعْرَ الْأَرَامِ فِي عِرَاصُهَا وَقِيَانُهَا كَأَنَّهُ حَبٌ فَفْلُل

You see that the dung of the white antelopes in its court and depressed plains is like the seeds of the pepper.
On the morning of the day of separation, when they loaded up, it was as though I were a man who broke colocynth near the acacia tress of the tribe.

My friends stopped their riding-beasts beside me and they said to me "Do not destroy yourself with sadness but bear up".

My remedy for sadness and pain is an effusion on tears, but is there any place for crying near the disappeared traces?

As was your custom with Umm al-Huwayrith before her and her neighbour Umm al-Rabab near Ma’sal.

When both of them stood up, the musk diffused from them was like a gentle breeze of the east wind arriving with the sweet smell of cloves.

Because of my deep affection my tears flowed from my eyes on to the upper part of my chest, so that they moistened my sword-belt.

Did you not have many good days with them, especially the day near Dārat Juljul?

And the day that I slaughtered my riding-beast for the virgins, oh—how wonderful it was when its saddle was loaded up.

The virgins remained throwing its meat and its suet, like the fringes of strongly twisted raw silk, (into the cooking-pots).
And the day that I entered the howdah of Uqnaizah. She said to me “Woe to you, you will make me walk”.

As she was speaking, the camel saddle inclined with us both, “You have slaughtered my camel O Imru’ al-Qais, so go down”.

I said to her “Take off the saddle and loosen its rein, do not distance me from your gathered fruit.

I have come by night even to pregnant women or nursing women like you, and have turned her away from her one year old child, the wearer of amulets.

She half turned from me towards her crying child behind her, meanwhile her lower half still remained with me”.

And the day when, on the back of the sand-dune, she excused herself from me and took an oath to which she made no exception.

O Fatime, behave gently and leave aside some if this coquetry, if you really want to leave me, do it kindly!

Have I deceived you by the fact that your love is really killing me and that whatever you command my heart, it performs.

If my moral character has grieved you, extract gently my clothes from your clothes and let them slip off.

Your eyes did not shed tears except to beat me with your two arrows in my broken heart which has been massacred by you.
23. A white women of an apartment, whose tent was not greatly sought after: I have enjoyably passed a long time with her without hurry to depart.

24. I have passed by sentries and a body of men hankering after me, if only they could broadcast my death.

25. By that time, the Pleiades appeared in the sky like the appearance of a woman’s various ornaments.

26. I came to her and she had stripped off her clothes for sleep except for a single garment, waiting for my arrival near the curtain.

27. She said to me, “I swear by God, what cunning you have! I do not think that you will give up your mistaken ways.”

28. I went out with her and she dragged the skirt of her embroidered silk garment over our traces in order to remove them.

29. When we passed along the court-yard of the tribe, we headed for the foot of a long sandy hill.

30. I pulled the tufts of hair on the temple of her head then she inclined towards me, with thin flanks and fleshy ankles.

31. She has a white and slender body, not ample, her breasts are polished like a mirror.

She was like the first eggs of an ostrich, which has a mixture between white and yellow, fed with salubrious water where no one has alighted.

33. تصد وتبدى عن أسيل وتنبت بناظرة من وحش وحرة مطل. 
She turns from me and shows her full and smooth face; afraid—her glancing eyes like the wild beasts with young offspring at Wajrah.

34. وجد كجد الرم ليس بفاحش إذا هي تعته ولا يعطل. 
Her neck is like the neck of the white antelope, not ugly, when raised, nor unadorned with jewels.

35. وفرع يزين المتن أسود فاحم أنيت كفنو النخلة المتمكل. 
She has black, luxuriant hair adorning her back like the bunch of dates of a palm tree loaded with clusters.

36. غذائرها مستشفرات إلى العلا تفسل العقاص في متيني ومرسل. 
Her plaits of hair are twisted to the top, the hair-tresses go lost whether the hair is doubled or let loose.

37. وكتشح لطيف كالجسد مخضر وساق كأتيوب السني المذقل. 
She has thin flanks, and is slender in the waist like a twisted rope; her shanks are like the stem of a well-watered palm-tree with evenly set branches.

38. وتضحي فنثت المسلك فوق فراشها نووم الضحى لم ينطق عن تفضيل. 
The particles of the musk still spread over her bed, in the morning, when she is a heavy sleeper and she does not put anything over her single garment.

39. وتططر برخص غير شن كأنه أساريق ضي أو مساوية إسح. 
She raises her thin fingers which are nor hard, rough and callous but are like the red worms of Zaby or like the tooth-picks of the tamarisk tree.

40. تنفيء الفلام بالعشاء كأنها منارة معي راهب مبتل. 
She illuminates the darkness during the night like the light of a monk who at night withdraws to the service of God.

41. إلي مثلها يرثو الحليم صحبة إذا ما استكرت بين درع وب활. 

The forbearing man is attracted to the like of her with deep affection, since she is erect and well-proportioned neither a woman nor a girl.

The errors of men are dispelled after their youth but my heart is not one to be consoled of love for you.

How may crooked quarrellers have advised me and blamed me about you. They spared no pains in doing that, but I have answered them back.

A night like a wave of the ocean let down its curtain upon me with many kinds of anxiety to test me.

I said to him, when he stretched his spine, and mounted the hinder part of the body and raised the breast.

O long night, become clear with morning! But the morning is not any better than you.

O you deep night! It is as though your stars were attached carefully with thin flax rope to the hard stone.

Many a water-skin of tribes have I placed on the withers of a beast that submits to me and is repeatedly saddled.

I have crossed a valley like the belly of the ass, a barren land where the wolf yelps like the outcasts who is burdened with a large family.

I said to him, when he yelped, “Our way is little of wealth, supposing you have never had any wealth.
Both of us, when we obtain a thing, destroy it, and he who tries to cultivate my land and your land, will surely become emaciated.

I make my journey in the morning when the birds are still in their nests, on a large, well-bred horses that outstrips the wild beasts.

Useful in both attacking and fleeing, both coming and going, like a large rock which the torrent has driven down from a high place.

It is a dark-bay colour; the soft hair in the middle of its back is as slippery as the stone that has slipped because of the pouring rain.

Despite his leanness, he is lively and his galloping, when the heat boils in him, is like the bubbling of a copper caldron.

A galloper when the swimming horses, despite their fatigue, kick up the dust from the pounded earth furrowed with hooves.

He causes the light youth to slip from his back and casts away the garments of the rough and heavy rider.

Swift like the boy's spinning-top, which is made to spin by his manipulation of a string attached to it with alternate hands.

He has the flanks of an antelope and the legs of an ostrich, the swift run of a lion and the gallop of a fox.

Strong of rib, when you stand behind him he closes the space between his legs with a full and ample tail, hanging a little above the earth.
It does not incline to the one side (from force of habit).

61. When he leans on one side, the sides of his back are like a bride’s mortar or a pestle used for colocynth.

62. The blood of the leader-camels on his neck is like the juice of Henna in combed white hair.

63. A herd of gazelles appeared to us, its ewes like virgins of Duwär wearing long-skirted plaids.

64. They turned back like the intercalated necklace on the neck of one of good family.

65. So he caused us to overtake the leader-camels and behind him were the laggards in a group which had not separated.

66. He hit a bull and a cow in succession on overtaking them, but had not even sweated so as to be wet/drenched.

67. Then the cooks were roasting some of the meat on a spit, cooking it throughly and were stewing the rest of it in a quickly boiling pot.

68. We arrived in the evening, and one’s eyesight was almost incapable of appreciating his beauty (i.e. he beggared all description) for when the eye was raised to see him, it fell to the ground (immediately such was his beauty)

69. He spent the night saddled and bridled, standing under my gaze and was not let loose.
O my friend! Look at the lightning which I am showing you, – its faint shining is like the flashing of the hands in a heaped-up cloud-bank.

that illuminates its lightning; or like the lamps of a monk who has poured oil on their tightly-twisted wicks.

I sat down to watch it with my friends – between Ćārij and al-ʿudhayb after I had gazed at it long and hard.

Over Qātān as predicted lay the right side – its left over al-Satār and Yadbul.

It began to pour water down around Kutayfah and tossed on their faces the lofty trees of al-Kanahbul.

Some of their foliage passed over the al-Qānān so that it caused the white-footed goats to descend from all their haunts there/by every path.

In Tayma’ it did not leave even the trunk of a palm tree nor any strong-hold except for one built with mighty stones.

Thabīr at the beginning of heavy rain was like a great one of the people dressed in striped clothes

In the morning the top of the peak of al-Mujaymir, as a result of the torrent and the refuse was like the whirl of a spindle.

And since I saw the wheel of the heavy dust

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And since I saw the wheel of the heavy dust
The clouds poured down what it contained on the desert of Ghābit as the Yemeni loaded with leather bags dismounts (from his camel).

80. كَانَ مِكَانِيُّ الْجَوَاءَ عَذَى صَبحٌ سَلَافٌ مِّن رَحْنِيِّ مَقْفُولٍ
As if in the morning the whistling birds of the desert of Jiwā’ are given an early draught consisting of the first juice of the grape—a strong, pure, spiced wine.

81. كَانَ السِّبَاعُ فِي هَبْبٍ عَذَى بِأَرْجَالِهِ القَصُوْى أَناَيِّشٌ عَنْصَلٍ
In the evening, the birds of prey are drowned in the furthest parts of the desert of Jiwā’ like plucked roots of the wild onion.

STRUCTURAL ANALYSES

Lines 1–6 : The Desereted Encampment
Line 3 : The dung of the antelopes
Line 4 : His grief caused by separation from his beloved
Line 5–6 : Weeping—countering the sadness by mentioning the companions
Lines 7–47 : The Naṣib
Line 7 : His past love-affairs
Line 8 : Their smell of musk
Line 9 : His grief at separation
Line 10 : The affair which was experienced between Imru’ al-Qays and *Unayzah at Dārat Juljul.
Lines 12–13 : The slaughtering of the camel
Lines 13–17 : The seduction of *Unayzah
Lines 18–22 : Declaration of his love for *Unayzah on a different occasion.
Lines 23–25 : Poet’s bravery in penetrating his beloved’s heavily guarded tent at night,
Lines 26–29 : They retire to a sand-dune to make love
Lines 30–42 : The description the beauty of the beloved
Lines 30–31 : Thin flanks, fleshy ankles, slender body—not ample—The ribs are polished like a mirror.
Line 32 : The colour of her skin: like the first eggs of an ostrich—mixed between white and yellow.
Lines 33–34 : Her beautiful face, her full and smooth neck, her glance is like that of an oryx of Wajrah looking after its child.
Lines 35-36: The description of her hair.
Line 37: The description of the body of his beloved: Thin flanks and a slender waist.
Line 38: The smell of musk diffusing over the bed.
Line 39: Thin fingers like the red worm in the desert of Zaby.
Line 40: She glows at night like the lamp of a monk – so pure is her skin.
Line 41: The perfection of her physique.
Line 42: Poet’s devotion to her, – his cares, and the rebuttal of the reproacher.

Lines 44-47: *The night description.*
A night like a wave of the ocean – The stars in the sky – The many kinds of anxiety he faces.

Lines 48-51: Attributed by the commentators to Ta’abbata Sharran – The description of the way of life in the desert. His conversation with the wolf.

Lines 52–69: *The hunting section.*
Line 52: The morning departure – the birds are in their nests.
Line 53: The description of his horse – its swiftness
Line 56: Swifter than the ‘swimming’ horses when they raise a cloud of dusty by stamping on the hard soil.
Lines 57–58: His swiftness caused the light youth to slip – speed like the spinning top.
Line 59: Flanks of a buck – the legs of an ostrich. The gallop of the wolf – The canter of a fox.
Line 60: His strong ribs – full and ample tail.
Line 61: Riding him is like the pounding of the bride’s mortar and the pestle used for colocynth; such on his leaness and the hardness of his flesh and bones.
Line 62: “The blood of the leader – camels on his neck is like the juice of Henna is combed white hair”.
Line 63: The prey: A hard of gazelles like the virgins of Dâwâr.
Line 64: They scatter and resemble a necklace by so doing.
Line 65: The poet’s horse is in the front of the party.
Line 66: The running down of a bull and a cow
Line 67: The cooking of the meat.
Line 68: The poet’s aesthetic appreciation of his horse’s magnificence.
Line 69: Man and horse remain ready for action throughout the night.
Lines 70–81: Storm Section.
Lines 70–74: Observing the clouds
Lines 70–71: The lightning.
Lines 72–73: The place for observing the clouds—Darj and al-Udhayb.
Line 73: The territories the cloud covered: Qatan, al-Satar, Yadbul.
Line 74: The pouring rain, drenching Kutayfah and uprooting the trees of al-Kanahbul.
Lines 75–77: The destruction it causes in the whole region
Lines 78–81: The signs left by the storm the next day.
Line 78: The speak of al-Mujaymir was like the whirl of a spindle.
Line 79: The desert of Ghabiṭ was drenched by the rain which fell as when the Yemeni loaded with leather bags dismounts.
Lines 80–81: The sign of fertility—The birds have their morning draught.
Line 81: The birds of prey drown in the furthest region of the desert.

REFERENCES


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