

Sulu'k Poets in a Post-Modern Perspective: A Study of Al-Shanfara's Lamiyyat Al-Arab Based on Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Aesthetics

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Abstract

This paper illustrates how the Pre-Islamic Sulu'k's vision, in many aspects, proves to be a representation of the cynicism and skepticism of post-modern ideology. I compare and contrast Al-Shanfara's Lamiyyat Al-Arab to the philosophy of Nietzsche, as one of the pioneers of post-modern ideology. In the article, I explain how the Sulu'k poet rejects the politics of a civilized human society, associates himself with the lawless animal kingdom, and extracts his morality and aesthetics from his "will to power". He does not celebrate the human society as a proper environment for living with its confining rules and weakening morality; rather, he rejoices the animal society for its wilderness and freedom. The main purpose behind this comparison is to assert the precedence of post-modern ideology in the pre-Islamic Sulu'k's poetry much before it is attributed to modern western philosophy.

Introduction

The significance of pre-Islamic poetry lies in the pre-Islamic poet's alternating vision of life and death, happiness and sorrow, past and present as two sides of the same reality. This vision enables him to understand the realistic temperament of life and nature that surround him. In the happiest moment of his experience, there is a reference to death and sorrow, and vice versa. However, Pre-Islamic poets tend to end their poems with a sense of restoration of order and harmony, asserting their tribal glories, capabilities, and continuity. The Sulu'k poet shares the same vision of mingling between life and death, pleasure and grief; but his philosophy of the aesthetics differs from the one of the typical pre-Islamic poet. He does not celebrate the human society as a proper environment for living with its confining rules and weakening morality; rather, he rejoices the animal society for its wilderness and freedom. He identifies himself more with the wild beast which could live in the worst possible circumstances, yet elevates and refines himself as having the best manly manners. It is a disturbing interpretation of the proper codes of power, courage and morality. This paper illustrates how the Sulu'k's vision, in many aspects, proves to follow a post-modern ideology. For the purpose of this study, I compare and contrast Al-Shanfara's *Lamiyyat AL-Arab* to the post-modern philosophy of Nietzsche, as one of the pioneers of post-modern ideology. The main purpose behind this comparison is to assert the precedence of post-modern ideology in the pre-Islamic Sulu'k's poetry much before it is attributed to modern western philosophy.

Pre-Islamic Poetry

Pre-Islamic poetry remains a very significant source of Arab's culture and heritage. It explains Arabs' core values of honor, pride and glory and provides abundance of examples of courage, sacrifice and romantic love. In many of these poems, poets celebrate their love, pride tribal affiliations and express their alliances and enmity. The pre-Islamic period is known as "Aljahelya," when Arabs were obsessed with good poetry. They would send their children to live with Bedouin tribes to learn the standard Arabic dialect (Alfoshah) and to recite oral poetry.

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Arabs believed that Bedouins maintained their standard Arabic dialect because they did not interfere with other dialects in the cities. When their youths become famous poets, they would recite their poetry in the seasonal market gatherings, *Souq*, and the best of their poems will be hanged on the wall of the Holy shrine, Al-Kaaba (The Cubic Squire in Makah, Saudi Arabia, where Muslims travel to do pilgrimage), a very prestigious acknowledgement. Like most of the ancient literature, Pre-Islamic poetry was recited orally which led many historians and critics to doubt its authenticity and existence before or after Islam. Many orientalist question the level of literacy that Pre-Islamic poets had, the religious references that exist in most of their poems, and the use of unified linguistic features despite the lack of a written medium. However, the Pre-Islamic poet seemed to know the stories of many cultures that came before him, especially in his encounters with different people in seasonal markets and gatherings. As for his poetry, he relied on listening and absorbing the poetry of others, applying the same formulas and practicing alone, and finally singing his own songs to others when he feels he has fully acquired the art of composing his own poetry to those already-established formulaic expressions and rhythmic patterns.

Nietzsche's Definitions of the Aesthetics

Introducing Nietzsche, Eagleton summarizes the core of Nietzsche's aesthetics as, "the root of all culture for Nietzsche is the human body" (234). Therefore, it is this emphasis on the human body that illustrates the whole philosophical framework of Nietzsche regarding aesthetics. Nietzsche begins his discussion of the aesthetics with the idea that history, art and reason are products of the human drives and needs. In his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, he states that the nature of Greek tragedy is based on both the Apollonian and the Dionysian worlds. According to him, the Dionysian world represents human instinct and desires which, if they are "sublimated" and reproduced in the Apollonian beautiful shapes, can result in great works of art: "with those two gods... we link our recognition that in the Greek world there exists a huge contrast, in origins and purposes, between visual (plastic) arts, the Apollonian, and non-visual art of music, the Dionysian" (34). Then, Nietzsche illustrates the rationality in his conviction that there is no "absolute truth". For him, the whole world is run by the human's "will to power". According to him, the will to truth, as Eagleton states it, "means constructing the kind of world within which one's power can best thrive and one's drives most freely function" (235). Therefore, he accused Greek philosophers of deceiving and exploiting the people with their thoughts and prejudices under the name of rational truths: "there is a profound illusion which first entered the world in the person of Socrates- the unshakable belief that rational thought, guided by causality, can penetrate the depth of the being, and that it's capable not only of knowing but even of correcting the being" (*Birth of Tragedy* 15). Finally, Nietzsche tries to analyze and expose the mechanics or politics of the state where people are controlled and restricted under the hegemony of the system. According to him, the will to power is the "fundamental drive" in the universe which can be fulfilled through the domination of other wills. Therefore, the system, under the name of civilization, imposed many restrictions that weaken the individual's will to power, turning him into a passive-obedient citizen. The following chapters explain how the Pre-Islamic Sulu'k poet represents this philosophy of the "will to power." The Sulu'k poet rejects all the limitations and politics of the civilized human society and triumphs for his animalistic courage and power. He extracts his morality and aesthetics from the wild beast society and sublimates his natural desires and needs into creative forms of arts.

The Sulu'k's Poem

Unlike the typical pre-Islamic tribal poet who usually starts his poem with *atalal*, literally means ruins of the beloved's home after she left or the tribe of the poet's himself, recollecting his sweet memories with his beloved and the harmony he used to live in among his tribe or his beloved's tribe, the Sulu'k poet, namely Al-Shanfara, begins his poem with a call for break of any possible ties with his people, a call for disintegration. In this rejection of any social integration with his human society, the poet denounces all the traditional tribal values of loyalty, protection and the social system as a whole. In this respect, the Sulu'k poet overruled the confining nature of the system, rejected it and triumphed for his own freedom and independence. This rejection mirrors the post-modern philosophical definition of the politics of the state which is defined as the most confining and obstructing factor to the growth of the human mind and soul. Nietzsche has emphasized that people are controlled and restricted under the hegemony of the system, having been deprived of their "will to power" and reduced to be mere obedient and incapable individuals. Therefore, the system, under the name of civilization, imposed many restrictions that weaken the individual's will to power, turning him into a passive-obedient citizen.

Moreover, the same system keeps on enforcing false notions of rationality, democracy and “detached objectivity” to remain in power. Those ruling members maintain their wills to power through these notions and prevent any possible rebellion against their authority. Nietzsche explains the falsehood of these notions. According to him, democracy is the will to power of a group of people to dominate by ways of deception the other wills of the “herd”: “A state is called the coldest of all cold monsters. Coldly lieth it also, and this lie creepeth from its mouth: I, the state, am people. It is a lie!” (*Zarathustra* 11). Foucault, following Nietzsche, also emphasizes that the system creates its own “delinquents” to maintain its power over other people. Therefore, Nietzsche, as well as his followers, rejects this hegemony of the system which obstructs the individual of practicing his own will to power. This will to power can be achieved by individuals when they have their own autonomy, free choice and creative subjectivity. This will to power is simply “their will to life” (Gay science, 349). The Sulu’k poet explains his innovative philosophy of the failure of the civilized system to elevate the soul and stresses the needed freedom for the human heart and mind. He sees the system as restricting, suffocating and overpowering. To the opposite of the incompetent human society that the poet rejects, he praises the animal society with all its wilderness. Al-Shanfara starts his poem with a total break with his family and the people of his tribe, “raise, my brothers, the chests of your mounts, set them straight; I incline towards another tribe (1).” He discards the most intimate social ties, brotherhood and kinship, declaring his deviation from the tribe. The intensity of this rejection increases when the poet chooses another society for him, the animal society, the wild beasts, which recurs throughout the poem: from the human to the anti-human, from civilization to the enemies of civilization. His new family includes the wolf, the leopard, and the female hyena; all are notorious beasts which either prey on human society or devour unburied corpses of dead human bodies. It is in this new family that the poet finds power, courageousness, remoteness of harm, and refuge. As for his new family members, he does not deal with them as irrational beasts but as reasonable and trustful creatures, who keep the secret and never conspire against each other. Therefore, the first three lines of *Lamiyyat Al-Arab* set the atmosphere for the whole poem as well as the vision of the Sulu’k poet, exposing the duplicity of human society while praising the wilderness of the primitive, uncivilized animal society with which the poet identifies himself throughout the entire poem.

The Sulu’k’s Morality

In lines 4-15, Al-Shanfara states the characteristics of the figure of the Sulu’k, mostly in reference to himself. This introduction of the figure of the Sulu’k and his morality is significant to explain the rest of the poem. After his disintegration from human society, the poet explains to his audience that this deviation from his human society is not due to any misbehavior or misconduct on his part. Rather, he represents the brightest tribal values of manly manners. He does not like to be confused with the effete and the effeminate, the foolish and the impotent, the cowardly or incompetent, “he describes himself as exceeding, not failing short of, the re-aggregate tribal male in endurance, fortitude, and resolve” (Suzanne 383). He is living among very brave creatures (animal society); yet when it comes to a competition, he is much braver. He is not the “quickest” to stretch his hands to provision, not because of his inability but of his magnanimity which dictates him to do so. He is not a coward or ineffectual fellow.

The Sulu’k Poet’s Sublimation

Then, there is the hunger motif which the Sulu’k poet always endorses as a cultivated art, or an acquired skill. The Sulu’k accepts and celebrates the state of hunger, which in his case is not a result of his laziness or incompetence but as a technique of self-elevation and self-refinement. In Nietzsche’s book *Beyond Good and Evil*, he argues his notion of the “order-of-rank”, which exists between people and moralities. According to him, some people are stronger than others, having more abilities to refine their spirits. These people who have strong abilities of refining their spirits are the only people qualified to reach the state of the “*Urbmensch*”, a German word that means the superman or the overman, as it is translated into English. Therefore, Al-Shanfara, as well as the other Sulu’k poets, has very early developed this notion of suppressing the self for achieving more spiritual and moral qualities. Their self-sacrificial attitude is a part of their moral aesthetics, which is the source of their pride. The nearest example of Sulu’k poet in western literature is the archetypal English folk hero, Robin Hood, who is famous for robbing the rich to provide for the poor, fighting against injustice and tyranny. The Sulu’k poets used to invade and rob their tribes and the tradesmen passing the desert not for satisfying their own desires but for rebelling against the social injustice of the current system. In lines 21 and 22, the poet gives an astonishing image of how he deals with hunger, “I prolonged the periods of hunger until I have killed it; I turn my mind from it and forget it / I eat the earth’s dust dry, lest any benefactor think me indebted for his favor.” In these lines, the Sulu’k poet explains how he suppresses his physical needs for more achievement of self-sublimation; moreover, he expresses this act of sublimation in a very creative manner, where repressing basic desires of hunger sharpens his mind and creativity.

In post-modern definition of aesthetics of arts, mainly in the philosophy of Nietzsche, it is believed that history, art and reason are products of the human body's derives and needs. In Nietzsche's first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, he states that the nature of Greek tragedy is based on both the Apollonian and the Dionysian worlds. According to him, the Dionysian world represents the human body's instincts and desires which, if "sublimated" and reproduced in the Apollonian beautiful shapes, can result in great works of art: "with those two gods (...) we link our recognition that in the Greek world there exists a huge contrast, in origins and purposes, between visual (plastic) arts, the Apollonian, and non-visual art of music, the Dionysian. Both very different drives go hand in hand, for the most part in open conflict with each other and simultaneously provoking each other all the time to new and more powerful offspring" (34). This theme of sublimation also appears in Freud's psychoanalytical explanation of arts where sexual energies are sublimated into fine arts. So the rule of the artist is to sublimate his body's desires and drives, through repressing them, into more artistic production. As for forgetting the self, Nietzsche emphasizes in the same book that the "subjective fades into complete forgetfulness of the self" (35). This act of sublimation is a dominant feature of the Sulu'k's life. He suppresses his hunger and his other desires to set an example of patience, sacrifice and magnanimity. Al-Shanfara has produced in line 26 and 27 a very colorful picture of the sublimation of the human needs into an artistic production, "I writhe around the hollow of my gut, like a rope-maker twisting his strands, firm and tightly twisted / I go out early in the morning on scanty food, like the thin-hipped wolf led on from one waste to another, dust-colored". The poet, in these lines, introduces the theme of ever-intensifying hunger, which he has cultivated into an acquired skill like rope-making. So, the Sulu'k is cultivating the art of starvation into an occupation. This theme of hunger best serves the poem to move into the other unit which is the description of the friendship of the Sulu'k poet with the wolf.

The Significance of the Wolf Image

Unlike the typical pre-Islamic poem, where the poet is celebrating his *naqa* (she-camel), the mount on which he would pass the desert, coming home to his tribe and family, or the *faras* (horse) as his companion in his battles and hunt, the Sulu'k poet identifies himself more with the wolf and other wild beasts which live a similar life to the Sulu'k's. This identification with wild beasts emphasizes the main principle of Sulu'k's philosophy that he is anti-human society. It is in the figure of the wolf that Al-Shanfara sees himself because both Sulu'ks and wolves live the same life of danger, hardship, poverty, adversity and wilderness. The poet describes this wolf society, emphasizing their physical feral behavior, "wide-mouthed, bare teeth" and "ferocious" (31). Then, in a very musical language and a very delightful tone, he paints an interesting image of the wolf kingdom, their hierarchy, and leadership. Al-Shanfara, as a careful observer and permanent resident of the desert, describes how these wolves function as social predators and hunt in organized packs according to strict, rank-oriented, power hierarchies. Describing his response to their wolf leader, Al-Shanfara says in lines 30, 31,32,33,35, "he (the wolf leader) clamored, and they clamored; he shut his eyes, and they theirs; he whined and they whined; he desisted and they desisted; he returned and they returned." The idea is to invoke an indirect comparison between the powerful animal society of wolves and the weak human society. According to Al-Shanfara, the animal society is the ideal one. They share the same experience of poverty and destitution (social and economically equal to each other), but they perfectly exemplify leadership, power and unity. The Sulu'k poet is celebrating their morality as a better alternative to the weak, exploitative morality of the human society. In other words, Al-Shanfara is celebrating courage, power and mercilessness as positive characteristics of the wolf society. This idea is very similar to Nietzsche's philosophy of weak human morality which he describes as an obstacle against the improvement of the human race. In his book *The Genealogy of Morals*, the first essay "Good and Evil", Nietzsche negates any possible transcendental origin for the terms "good" and "evil". He argues how these terms have acquired different meanings throughout history, creating a disfigured structure of power. His analysis of morality results in two systems of moralities, "master morality" and "slave/Christian morality". While "master morality" praises and celebrates power, wealth and success, "slave morality" condemns these qualities, as "bad/evil" and celebrates weakness and poverty. Therefore slave/Christian morality reverses the system of "master morality", developing other notions of weakness and surrender imbedded in concepts as the "other life" and "divine justice". According to Nietzsche, this "slave morality" is a major source of all evil. Nietzsche celebrates "master morality" with all its emphasis on power and success praising Epic warriors as Beowulf and Odysseus. According to Nietzsche, religion and morality with all their beliefs in the 'original sin', "other life" and "divine justice" lead to self-contempt humans and therefore blocking the way to the *Urbemensch*, the overman.

The Sulu'k poet is the best example for this philosophy that celebrates power and success whatever is the means. In the sulu'k poet's association with wild beasts, he deviates himself from any possible ties to human morality or religion. This idea is explained further in Al-Shanfara's description of his invasions of human societies in the last unit of the poem.

Night Raids of the Sulu'k

Instead of the *fakhar* (pride) unit in the typical pre-Islamic poem, where the poet describes his tribe, their victory over the enemies, and his horse as his companion, the Sulu'k poet ends his poem with a description of his night-raids that he accomplishes, and the fear and death he causes to the human society. Al-Shanfara in the lines 44-58 of his *Lamiyyat Al-Arab* sets a clear example of what the Sulu'k looks like, describing him as a merciless primitive creature of nature. In describing his power and courage, he associates himself with the evilness of nature, "I widowed women and orphaned children, then returned as I set out, and the night was black (56)." He praises himself as death-cause to human beings, as a destroying force and a merciless power. In his night raids, he is presented as the master of dark nights, cold weather, rain, hunger and fear. He ventures out for his livelihood in the worst conditions, adding to the fear of his raids. Instead of protecting his human society, particularly women and children, he exploits their fear of the dreadful dark and rainy weather and robs and kills their men. Once again, we see the image of wild beasts which exploit darkness to prey on human beings, "they said 'our dogs were whining in the night', we said, 'was it a wolf on the prowl or a prowling hyena-whelp?' / 'it was but a faint noise, then they turn back to sleep.' We replied, 'was it a sand grouse, startled, or a startled falcon?' (58/59) The imagery used to describe the characteristics of the Sulu'k is acrimonious. He identifies himself with the most feral animals, breaking any possible ties with human civilization.

Nature vs. Nurture

The Sulu'k poet is entirely the opposite of the civilized human being. As a person, he rejoices the brutality of nature over civilization and elegance. Al-Shanfara describing his physical appearance as, "Many a day of the Dogs Star, when the heat waves melt, and the vipers writhe restlessly on the scorching earth / I faced straight on, no covering to shield me, not any veil, except a tattered cloak / and full long hair; when the wind blows its matted locks fly up on all sides, uncombed" (61, 62, 63). The Sulu'k takes pleasure in exposing himself to the brutal nature without any veil to cover him from the scorching sun; his hair is uncombed, unanointed, and full of lice and filth. The idea is that the more brutal the human being is, the nearer he is to the overman, as explained later by Nietzsche. In Nietzsche's philosophy of the power and weakness of the human behavior, he celebrates the physical brutality and viciousness of the warrior over the elegant middle class bourgeoisie. In his book, *The Will to Power*, he indirectly indicates that there is no place for the weak or the sick in his society of the *Urbemensch*. Thus, this brutal nature of the Sulu'k and his unawareness of elegance and cleanliness are logical consequences of the tough life he leads in the desert. He disconnects himself from his human society with all its stylishness and sophistication and chooses for himself the life of a beast with all its brutality and roughness.

Conclusion

The Sulu'k poet has thoroughly understood the limits of the civilized human society. He is a pioneer in asserting that human society is confining and overpowering, attempting to get his freedom and independence in another society, the beast society. His codes of morality and aesthetics are extracted from the brutality and wilderness of nature. He associates himself with wild animals in courage and ferocity; yet his manly behavior is still dominating his actions. It is a combination of nature force and power along with his self-respect and magnanimity. In his behavior, he is the nearest example of the ideal post-modern figure of the *Urbemensch* that Nietzsche and his post-modern followers have prophesized. He has the toughness and cruelty of a warrior, yet the ability to sublimate his needs and desires into apollonian shapes, creating a sense of artistic innovation. The earlier existence of this philosophy of the *Urbemensch* in pre-Islamic poetry proves the timelessness of this poetry, as well as the universality of the figure of the pre-Islamic Sulu'k poet.

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