

The Power of Poetry



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Madawi al-Rasheed's book "Politics in an Arabian Oasis" dedicates a unique chapter to "the power of poetry", titled "making history" and discusses its role in the history of her family, the house of Rasheed at Hail. It seems appropriate to the author to transfer her theses on oral *badu* tradition to the traditions concerning horses. Rasheed claims that Arabic poems (*qusdan* or *qasaid*, sing. *qasidah*) have been orally transmitted historical archives. Poetry becomes the medium of history and the *amir*-poet is his own historian, not of peace, order, stability and prosperity, but rather of political and military conflict. One striking example of the power of poetry (concerning horses) is the poet Shahwan from the 13th century AD, who composed a poem in praise of his mare Al Dahmah, still known today, more than 700 years later.

The pastoral society of Arabia relied on the camel as the starting point of maybe the closest and most unique relationship of a society between men and beast to be found on earth. In this society only one form of art developed: poetry. "It is supposed that the very beginnings of the Arab poetry originated from the rhythmic steps and the gargling sounds of the camels and that we can perceive as first roots of this poetry the little songs of the camel riders and drovers, to be heard until today. Men sing it to hold their animals in a steady pace and at the same time not to fall asleep themselves: in a single brittle pitch, coming high from their throat and dying away in the clear air. The camel, the Arab say, only marches well, as long as it hears the rider on his back singing or talking" (Schiele).

But the horse added glory and this special extra to it, transformed the pastoral nomad into the knight, the simple Bedouin into a hero and poet of Thousand and One Nights. The remarkable close bond between *faris* (horse) and *faras* (rider) was based on that special man-loving character, which is until today the most important characteristic of the Bedouin horse. The horse depended on its master and could only survive with his help and the help of the camel. And men, especially in the competitive society of Arabia, depended on the horse, as victory was bound to the horse. The horse presented the Bedouin a decisive advantage over his enemy, because "it was much easier to make or repel an attack on horseback than when mounted on camel" (Musil). We can say that a **sybiotic relationship** between man and horse stands in opposition to a "**parasitic**" relationship between man and camel (Jabbur). This is also reflected in the different ways the two animals are integrated into Arabic poetry.

The subject of both classical and Nabati (post-classical) poetry was the same and included (according to Jabbur) boasting and speaking in glowing terms of the poet's own tribe, raids and battles, the defeat of enemy raiders, also panegyric, erotic description, elegy, and admonition. Arabic poetry is "intrinsically competitive" (Sumi) and thus a true child of its culture. And "for the poet the horse is not a mere object of poetic wasf (description). The poem instead presents the sybiotic relationship of poet and horse. ... The hunter/persona and the horse are portrayed as united not only in the sphere of body, but also in spirit." The ideal image of the horse (*khayl*) given by the poet symbolizes not only speed and strength, but also prowess, glory, happiness, immortality, fertility and vital force, vanity, arrogance, pride, and splendor. Thus the horse has become the symbol of **murū'ah**: mature manhood, manly perfection or male aggression." And therefore, also the symbol of the essence of *badu* society in the whole.

Image in classical Arab poetry, according to Sumi, is therefore to be understood not as "picture" but as "likeness", as a matter of spiritual similarity, an anti-pictorial meaning, which originates with the account of man's creation "in the image and likeness of God" (in the First Book of the Bible, Genesis). The Arabic concept of *surah*, usually translated as "image" has etymologically a similar meaning: "mental image, a resemblance of any object, formed or conceived by the mind, an idea, a meaning of frequent occurrence in philosophical works." Although post classical Arab poetry stands in the tradition of the classical *qasidah*, some changes have to be noted. The horse of Nabati poetry is no more a stallion, but (nearly) always a mare, a mare of war.

This is an excerpt from the book

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