



THE TYPES OF ARTISTIC IMAGERY IN KA‘B IBN ZUHAYR’S QASIDA “BAANAT SU‘AD”

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Abstract. *This article analyzes the types of artistic imagery and poetic devices employed in Ka‘b ibn Zuhayr’s qasida “Baanat Su‘ad,” regarded as one of the earliest masterpieces of Islamic literature. The study highlights the poet’s mastery in utilizing artistic techniques such as simile (tashbih), metaphor (isti‘ara), allegory, and irony, and examines their semantic and phonological dimensions. The analysis further explores the harmony between Pre-Islamic (Jahiliyya) poetic traditions and the Islamic spirit manifest in the literary devices of the qasida, with particular attention to the descriptions of Su‘ad, the garobil (sieve) simile and its phonological significance, and the rhetorical device of tajrid (abstraction).*

Keywords: *Ka‘b ibn Zuhayr; Baanat Su‘ad; qasida; artistic imagery; tashbih; isti‘ara; Arabic poetry; poetics; Islamic literature; badi‘ tajrid.*

INTRODUCTION

A scholar who studies Ka‘b ibn Zuhayr’s “Baanat Su‘ad” attentively will attest that Ka‘b did not lack an original creative imagination in this work. Throughout the qasida, we encounter numerous images that demonstrate the depth of the poet’s thought, the breadth of his imagination, and the refinement of his approach. The qasida presents a unified (kulliy) image of the beloved: viewed from one perspective she appears as a woman of incomparable beauty and perfect grace, while from another she is a changeable, pledge-breaking, and restless lubbat (a cunning beloved). This unified image, through the harmonious arrangement of its constituent partial images, conveys the poet’s emotions and delicate feelings with exceptional precision (Ibn Tabataba, cited in Ka‘b ibn Zuhayr, 1992:23).

The qasida stands at a unique historical juncture: composed at the moment of Ka‘b’s conversion to Islam, it integrates the inherited conventions of Jahiliyya poetry –



the *nasib* (amatory prelude), the description of the beloved, and the journey motif – with a new Islamic consciousness and an explicit address to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). The aim of this article is to analyze the principal categories of artistic imagery deployed in the *qasida* and to assess their rhetorical and semantic functions.

METHODS

The article employs literary-analytical and rhetorical methods grounded in the classical Arabic science of *balaghah* (rhetoric). The corpus of analysis consists of selected verses from Ka‘b ibn Zuhayr’s “*Baanat Su‘ad*” as edited and commented upon by al-Tibrizi (Ka‘b ibn Zuhayr, 1992). Secondary sources include the rhetorical studies of Abu Musa (1991), Ibn al-Anbariy’s commentary (1980), the rhetorical manuals of al-Sa‘d (al-Mutawwal), Baghiyat al-Idah, and the literary-historical works of Krachkovskiy (1956), Filshtinskiy (1985), Adonis (2002), and Sultanov (2005). Each selected passage is analyzed at the levels of semantic structure, rhetorical device, image construction, and phonological texture.

RESULTS

1. The opening *isti‘ara*: the captive heart. In the opening verse of the *qasida*, the poet employs *isti‘ara* (metaphor) to depict his love-stricken heart as a captive:

بانت سعاداً فقلّثي اليوم متبؤلاً ...

“*Su‘ad* has departed – today my heart is tormented / captive...” In depicting his love-captive heart through the image of a prisoner, the poet employs *isti‘ara*: the *mushabbah* (the object of comparison, i.e., the heart) is suppressed, and allusion to it is made through the word “*makbul*” (shackled) – the heavy chains used to bind captives. The artistic beauty of this prelude lies in revealing the state of the lover’s heart as utterly afflicted, humiliated, and imprisoned. The phrases “*lam yajuz*” (not released for ransom) and “*lam yufad*” (not redeemed) further underscore the impossibility of escape from this captivity and imprisonment, intensifying the effect of the *isti‘ara* (Ibn Tabataba, cited in Ka‘b ibn Zuhayr, 1992:23).

2. The gazelle *tashbih*: the subtle simile. Following the opening metaphor, a series of *tashbih* (simile) constructions explains why the poet loves her so deeply and why he suffers so on her account:



وَمَا سَعَادُ غَدَاةِ الْبَيْنِ إِذْ رَحَلُوا ... إِلَّا أَعْرُنُ غَضِيضُ الطَّرْفِ

In this verse the poet compares his beloved to a deer. But his expansive imagination refines the image further: he compares her not simply to a deer but to a young fawn with a melodious (maghun) and pleasant voice. The innocence (futur) of its gaze and the natural kohl (kuhl) of its eyes lend the image singular beauty. The use of the phrase “ghadīd al-tarf” (with downcast gaze) perfects the image further, since modesty and the downward gaze are noble human qualities that the poet attributes to the mushabbah bih (the gazelle). Through this “divine kohl” (natural beauty), the beloved has wholly captivated the lover and established absolute dominion over him. This simile is built on the foundation of a powerful and eloquent qasr (restriction) style, raising the comparison to its highest point of effect and power (Abu Musa, 1991:209).

3. The wine-water simile: layered tashbih. In the following verses, a tashbih of exceptional artistry is developed:

تَجَلَّى عَوَارِضَ ذِي ظَلَمٍ إِذَا ابْتَسَمَتْ ... كَأَنَّهُ مُنْهَلٌ بِالرَّاحِ مَعْلُولٌ
شَجَّتْ بِذِي شَبَمٍ مِنْ مَاءٍ مُحْيِيَةٍ... صَافٍ بِأَبْطَحِ أَضْحَى وَهُوَ مَشْمُولٌ
تَجَلَّى الرِّيَّاحِ الْقَدَى عَنْهُ وَأَفْرَطَهُ... مِنْ صَوْبِ سَارِيَةِ بَيْضٍ يَعَالِيلُ

Here, the comparative particle ka’anna (“as if”) serves to convey with powerful logic the connection between the mushabbah and mushabbah bih. The poet compares his beloved’s gleaming teeth and delightful saliva at the moment of her smile to a fragrant wine that has been repeatedly watered (manhul bi-l-rah ma’lul) with the cold water of a stony valley. The water in question was taken from a clear, pebbled riverbed; it came down in a night rain (sariya), so that the sun had not yet warmed it by midday; northern breezes (mashmul) have swept the dust from its surface; and it flows down from white mountain peaks (bīd ya’alīl). The poet’s artistry manifests in his expansion of the boundaries of both the mushabbah and mushabbah bih images and in the deepening of the semantic layers through successive accumulation of qualifying attributes (Ka’b ibn Zuhayr, 1992:23). It should be noted that this image – on account of its mention of wine (khamr) – is somewhat removed from Islamic sensibility. However, the fact that the poet wrote this before having tasted the sweetness of faith constitutes a reasonable excuse for his use of this convention.



4. The garobil (sieve) simile and phonological analysis. The poet depicts the beloved's faithlessness through the image of sieves (gharabīl) that cannot hold water:

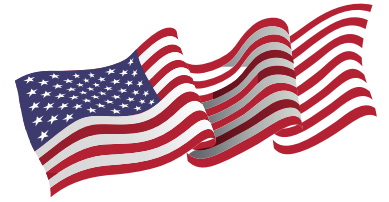
وَمَا تَمَسَّكَ بِالْوَصْلِ الَّذِي رَعَمَتْ ... إِلَّا كَمَا تُمْسِكُ الْمَاءَ الْعَرَابِيلُ

The poet compares the beloved's connection with her pledge to the relationship between a sieve and water. The use of qasr (restriction) technique in this verse further heightens the eloquence of the image. The verse also contains a subtle phonological feature: the first verb – tumassiku (تَمَسَّكَ) – with shaddah (gemination), attributed to the beloved in relation to her pledge, and the second verb attributed to the sieve – tumsiku (تُمْسِكُ) – without shaddah. This distinction signals the poet's state of anger and outrage at the beloved's inconstancy, for “geminated (shadded) consonants correspond to the state of an angered and distressed person.” These geminates reflect the waves of anguish and agitation in the poet's spirit (Abu Musa, 1991:209). The poet continues: “The promises of ‘Urqub were a proverb for her...” – ‘Urqub being a figure proverbial among the Arabs for breaking promises. Though this is a blameworthy quality, the lover's heart is struck hard by it through the force of passionate love (Ibn al-Anbariy, 1980:98).

5. The badi' arts and the device of tajrid. Ka'b did not resort to affectation (takalluf) in his use of the badi' rhetorical arts, and his verses are therefore largely free of such ornamental excess (al-Mutawwal, al-Sa'd, cited in Baghiyat al-Idah, n.d.:420). In the following verse, the device of tajrid (abstraction) is employed:

فَلَا يَعْزُبُكَ مَا مَنَنْتَ وَمَا وَعَدْتِ إِنَّ الْأَمَانِيَّ وَالْأَحْلَامَ تَضْلِيلُ

This falls within the category of tajrid known as “self-address,” in which a person abstracts a second self from themselves and addresses counsel to it (Baghiyat al-Idah, n.d.:39; Dirasat Abu Stitit, 1994:17). Ka'b has separated from himself a second person and advised him not to be deceived by the beloved's promises, because he knows well her habit of breaking pledges and her changeable nature. This rhetorical art bestows beauty on the expression and depth and clarity on the meaning; at the same time, through its characteristic elements of ihm (suggestion) and khid'a (deception), it captures the reader's attention and exerts a powerful effect upon the spirit (Arus al-Afrah, n.d.:348; Hashiyat al-Dasuqi, n.d.:348–349).



DISCUSSION

The analysis of the five passages examined above confirms that “Baanat Su‘ad” is a work of remarkable rhetorical sophistication in which different categories of artistic imagery are deployed in a purposeful and integrated manner. The isti‘ara of the captive heart establishes the emotional keynote of the qasida with forceful economy; the gazelle tashbih develops this into an elaborately qualified portrait of the beloved that is both admiring and subtly ironic; the wine-water tashbih represents Ka‘b’s most technically ambitious image, in which the simple comparison between the beloved’s smile and a cup of wine is elaborated through a cascading series of qualifying clauses that function cumulatively to overwhelm the reader with the image’s beauty and the lover’s helplessness (Ka‘b ibn Zuhayr, 1992; Krachkovskiy, 1956:45).

The garobil simile and the tajrid device represent a complementary movement from the amatory to the didactic register. In the garobil verse, the shift from the geminated to the ungeminated verbal form constitutes a phonological enactment of the semantic content – the heavier form expressing the lover’s anguish, the lighter form expressing the ease with which the beloved lets go of her promises – a level of technical control rarely matched in classical Arabic poetry (Abu Musa, 1991:209; Adonis, 2002:67). The tajrid of self-address, finally, represents the poem’s most sophisticated rhetorical moment: the poet’s division of himself into an experiencing and an advising self mirrors the doubled structure of the qasida as a whole, which simultaneously occupies the positions of supplicant, lover, and wise observer (Filshinskiy, 1985:112; Sultanov, 2005:78).

CONCLUSION

Ka‘b ibn Zuhayr’s “Baanat Su‘ad” demonstrates the full range of the classical Arabic rhetorical toolkit – isti‘ara, tashbih, qasr, tajrid, and phonological expressiveness – deployed with restraint, precision, and organic integration. The poet does not apply these devices as external ornaments but as intrinsic structural elements through which the unified image of the beloved and the speaker’s complex emotional state – simultaneously captivated, despairing, and self-aware – are articulated with lasting force.

The qasida’s position at the threshold of the Islamic era gives it a unique double character: its imagery belongs formally to the Jahiliyya tradition, while its animating



spirit and its ultimate address to the Prophet look forward to the Islamic literary tradition that would follow. Future research should examine the qasida's reception history and its influence on subsequent Islamic panegyric poetry (*madīh*), as well as investigating the precise relationship between the pre-Islamic imagistic conventions it deploys and the theological framework they serve (Krachkovskiy, 1956; Adonis, 2002; Ka'b ibn Zuhayr, 1992).

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