CHAPTER VI

Contribution of Islamic Literature

The Arabic literature still remained an undiscovered land to the vast readers of both East and West, from 6th Century A.D. till the present day the literary achievements of Arabia became a continuous tradition and the structure remained somewhat unchanged. Practically this literature originated in the Pre-Islamic period of Arabia. But with the coming and spread of Islam this became the literature of all the places or regions within the Islamic world irrespective of native tongue or race. "For many centuries it was the literature on which were nurtured all the peoples living in the area between Arab Spain in the West and Central Asia in the East. Naturally in due course some of the native languages asserted or reasserted themselves, as was the case with Persian. In Spain it disappeared with the disappearance of the Arabs, though the influence of the Arabic remained for a long time. (Apart from place names, there remains a sizable component of Arabic common words in the Spanish of to-day) (1).

Like many other literatures - in Arabia Poetry appeared before prose. In pre-Islamic Arabia in 6th century A.D. - linguistically, materially and artistically this poetry was highly developed indeed. It sets standards of excellence which in later generations many poets, Arabs and

non-Arabs, strove to emulate. The most striking thing about this poetry is that it was lyric poetry, descriptive and highly individualised, reflecting the bedouins' ideals and attitudes towards life. This is perhaps best illustrated as "Ode" or "Qasidah" of the young poet Tarafah (d. ca 564) where he tells those who censure his way of life that since they cannot make him live for ever, he should be allowed to squander his youth and substance on the battle field and the pursuit of pleasures - these being wine, knighthood, errantry and dalliance, thus summing up much of the pre-Islamic temper with its admixture of hedonism, idealism and a certain pessimism." (2) Professor R.A. Nibholson translated one of his poems in the following manner:

"Canst thou make me immortal, 0 thou that blamest me so
For haunting the battle and loving the pleasures that fly?
If thou hast not the power to ward me from Death, let me go
To meet him and scatter the wealth in my hand, ere I die." Tarafah was the composer of one of the much celebrated Seven odes - sometimes counted as ten, known as "muallagat.

Here a few words are needed to evaluate the nature and extent of this pre-Arabic poetry. The "Jahiliyya" or pre-Islamic age covers more than a century, from 500 A.D. when the oldest poems were composed. This period lasted

2. Ibid - Page 61.
till Muhammad's flight to Medina, in 622 A.D. from when a new era in Arabian poetry started. This one hundred and twenty years "saw the rise and incipient decline of a poetry which most Arabic speaking Moslems have always regarded as a model of unapproachable excellence; a poetry rooted in the life of the people that insensibly moulded their minds and fixed their character and made them morally and spiritually a nation long before Muhammad welded the various conflicting groups into a single organism, animated, for sometimes at least, by a common purpose. In those days, poetry was no luxury for the cultured few but the sole medium of literary expression. Every tribe had its poets, who freely uttered what they felt and thought ... Thus in the midst of outward strife and disintegration a unifying principle was at work. Poetry gave life and currency to an ideal of Arabian virtue (muruwwa) which though based on tribal community of blood and insisting that only ties of blood were invisible bond between diverse clans, and formed, whether consciously or not, the basis of a national community of sentiment." (3)

The ancient Arabs held a poet, known as Shā'ir as a person having supernatural knowledge, "a wizard in league with spirits (jinn) or Satan (Shayatin) and depended on them for the magical power which be displayed. From the writings of Ibu Rashiq in 'Sujuti's "Muzhir" - we came to know "when there appeared a poet in a family of the Arabs, the other tribes

round about would gather together to that family and wish them joy of their good luck ... for a poet was a defence to the honour of them all, a weapon to ward off insult from their good name, and a means of perpetuating their glorious deeds and of establishing their fame for ever. And they used not to wish one another joy but for three things—the birth of a boy, to coming to light of a poet and the foaling of a noble mare.” (4) However, the idea of poetry as an art was a subsequent event. There were fountain-songs, war-songs and hymns to idols, possibly love songs and the dirge also existed in those days. But the poet or shá'ir mostly exhibited his power in Satire or "hija". The oldest form of poetical speech in Arabia was rhyme without metre, known as "Saj'. Later on, Saj' became a merely rhetorical ornament. But in its early stage it had a deeper, almost religious significance. Out of Saj' evolved the ancient Arabic metre, 'Raijaz'. Then gradually came the principal Arabian metres - the 'Kamil', the 'Wafir', the 'Tawil', the 'Basit', the 'Khafif'. All these metres are quantitative like the Greek and Latin metres: The rule of prosody was first deduced and systematised by the grammarian Khalib 'Abd Ahmad (791 A.D.) from the ancient poems. Prof. Nicholson told us that the first Arabian Ode was composed by, according to Tradition, Muhalhil - b - Rabia the Taghlibite. The fashion was adopted for the next one hundred years and remained unaltered till.

4. Translated by Sir Charles Lyall in the introduction to his "Ancient Arabian Poetry" - P - 17.
the end of the Umayyad period (750 A.D.). Thus in the classical period the Ode or Qasida remained the only finished type of poetry. The verses or "bayt" (plural 'abyāt) were well arranged, blank verses were unknown to the Arabs. The greatest of the Pre-Islamic poets was Imru'u'l-Qays whom Muhammad described as their leader to Hell-fire while Caliphs "Omar and Ali praised him for his genius and originality. His was the most famous and oldest of the "Mu'allaqat" - which are long poems or "seven long poems" as described earlier. The most renowned authors of this Mu'allaqat were Nabigha Asha and Alqama.

Needless to say much about the pre-Islamic poetry we now turn to the development of poetry of the subsequent days. Pre-Islamic poetry was the natural expression of nomad life. But the new conditions and ideas introduced by Islam did not bring a corresponding revolution in the poetical literature of the following century. The Umayyed poets simply imitated the antique odes. But in the Abbasid period a change came. A new current of reaction and favour for new poetry and contemporary literature emerged due to various circumstances which combined "to overthrow the prevalent theory that Arabian heathendom and the characteristic pagan virtues - honour, courage, liberality etc. were alone capable of producing poetical genius."(5) In this period we have seen the impact of the pictistic and theological spirit fostered.

5. Prof. R.A. Nicholson - A Literary History of the Arabs - P-287
by the Abbasid Government and the influence of foreign specially the Persian culture.

From first to last the new poetry of the Abbaside period simply flourished under the patronage of the Court. There was thus a qualitative change in the entire period in Arabic poetry. The old Bedouins praised man only for his inner worth and drew their imagination directly from the nature. Under the Umayyads little changes took place. But with the coming of the Abbasids, when the Persians filled the Chief Offices at Court, a new wave of ideas bathed the Arabian poetry. But yet "what the Persians brought into Arabian poetry was not a grandiose style, but a lively and graceful fancy, elegance of diction, depth and tenderness of feeling, and a rich store of ideas." (6)

The most renowned Abbasid poets were - Muti'-b-Iyas, Abu Niwás, Abu 'I - 'AtahiyaNutanabbi and Abu 'I 'Ala al-Ma'arri. It is needless to go in the details of their poetic works.

'Saj' or the rhymed prose long maintained the religious associations which it possessed in the pre-Islamic days and which were consecrated, for all moslems, by its use in the Quran. "About the middle of the ninth century it began to appear in the public sermons (khutba) of the Caliphs and their viceroys and it was still further developed by the professional preachers like Ibn Nahiya (+ 984 AD) and

6. Ibid - P-200
by official secretaries, like Ibrahim-b-Hilal al-Sabi (994 AD). Henceforth rhyme becomes a distinctive and almost indispensable feature of rhetorical prose."(7) al-Hamdhani (1007 AD) invented and popularised this remarkably new form and style of composition. He was conferred the little Badih 'l-Zaman or "the wonder of the age" by the posterity. There were other prose writers like Abu Muhammad al-Qasim al-Hariri of Basra.

The Quran, besides being mere a religious testament, is the first significant achievement of the Arabic language. This holy book is entirely expressed in a distinctive genre of prose, all its own. Hence both in ideas and mode of expression, the Quran had farreaching influence on Arabic literature. Based on the Quran not only the religious, legal, historical and other studies developed, variety of literary, lexical and linguistic disciplines also bloomed. But what was more significant, the Quran for the first time consolidated the Arabic language and converted the classical Arabic into a world language. The Arabs under the banner of Islam came out for conquering the West and East to spread Islam and the Arabic eventually became a universal language. In the urge of spreading the newly emerged cult Islam to the west, the Arabs crossed the Straits of Gibraltar and extended their conquests to every part of the peninsula. Thousands of Christians fell into their hands. But they were treated well by the Muslim Government, enjoyed their

7. Ibid - P-398.
religious liberty, "and often rose to high offices in the army or at Court. Many of them became rapidly imbued with Moslem civilisation, so that as early as the middle of the ninth century we find Alvaro, Bishop of Cordova, complaining that his co-religionists read the poems and romances of the Arabs and studied the writings of Muhammad's theologians and philosophers, not in order to refute them but to learn how to express themselves in Arabic with correctness and elegance ....". He wrote, "Alas, all young Christians of conspicuous talents are acquainted only with the language and writings of the Arabs; they read and study Arabic books with the utmost zeal .... and proclaim everywhere that this literature is admirable .... Alas, the Christians have forgotten their own language and amongst thousands of us scarce one is to be found who can write a tolerable Latin letter to a friend; whereas very many are capable of expressing themselves exquisitely in Arabic and of composing poems in that tongue with even greater skill than the Arabs themselves." (8)

Prof. Nicholson further observed - "However the good bishop may have exaggerated, it is evident that Muhammadan culture had a strong attraction for the Spanish Christians and equally, let us add, for the Jews, who made numerous contributions to poetry, philosophy and science, in their native speech as well as in the kindred Arabic idiom. 'The Renegades'.

8. Ibid - P.415.
or Spanish converts to Islam, became completely Arabicised in the course of a few generations; and from this class sprang some of the chief ornaments of Spanish-Arabian literature." (9)

However, it should be remembered that the Arabic poetry in the East was rather modified by the influence of Persian culture. In Spain the Aryans mingled with the Semites and introduced such a new element which left its mark on literature of both the races.

"The most interesting feature of Spanish - Arabian poetry are the tenderly romantic feeling which not infrequently appeared in the love-songs, a feeling that sometimes anticipates the attitude of medieval chivalry, and in the second place an almost modern sensibility to the beauties of nature. On account of these characteristics the poems in question appeal to many European readers who do not easily enter into the spirit of the Mu'allagat or the odes of Mutanabbi (10). The 'Zajal' and 'muwashshah' types of folk songs were invented in Spain. The Spanish Umayyads were lovers of poetry, music and polite literature. Ziryab, Ibn Hani and Ibn Zaydun were the renowned musician-poets of that age. The 10th century of Christian era was indeed a fortunate and illustrious period in Spanish history. For the advancement of material and intellectual culture of this age, credit should be bestowed on the rulers - Abdul -

10 Ibid - P.416.
Rahman III and his successor Hakim II. Hakim II had a big library with 400,000 books. Besides honouring and encouraging the learned, Hakim also tried to spread education among the poorest people of his domain. He founded twenty seven free schools in the capital and paid the teachers out of his private purse. Prof. Nicholson writes - "whilst in Christian Europe the rudiments of learning were confined to the clergy, in Spain almost everyone could read and write." Reference may be made of the University of Cordova. With the fall of the Spanish Umayyads the University of Cordova lost its prominence. Though she still remained the literary metropolis of Spain, her ancient glories were overshadowed by the independent dynasties which now began to flourish in Seville, Almeria, Badajoz, Granada, Toledo, Malaga, Valencia and other cities. Among them the most formidable group being the Abbáids of Seville. However, the most distinguished Spanish writers of this epoch were the historian Abú Marwán ʿAbd Alláh b. Muḥammad ibn Hayyán of Cordova who wrote the colossal history of Spain in six volumes entitled al-Matin, the jurisconsult and poet Abu 'l-Walid al-Báji, the traditionist Yúsuf ibn ʿAbd al-Barri, the geographer - al-Bakri, the famous Jew Solomon ibn Gabirol (Avicebron) who wrote two philosophical works in Arabic and Samuel Ha-Levi.

During the whole of the twelfth and even in the
first half of the thirteenth century two African dynasties - the Almoravides and the Almohades ruled Spain. The rest of Muslim Spain was soon subdued. It was in 1158 A.D. Abdul-Mu'min of the Almohades, with his mighty sword "united the whole coast from the frontier of Egypt to the Atlantic, together with Moorish Spain, under his sceptre."(11) This new dynasty was rather enlightened and favourable to culture than what the Almoravids was. During this period we have got the talents like Yusuf who had keen interest for history and philosophy, the great Aristotelian Ibn Tufayl, a Court physician, and Ibn Rushd. The Almohades curiously blended liberty and intolerance. It is true writers like Ibn Bajja, Ibn Rushd, Ibn Tufayl, Musa b. Maymun made their influence felt far beyond the borders of Spain. Rather "they belong, in the sense to Europe."(12) We have other names like Muhayi 'l-Din Ibn 'Arabi, Ibn Sakhin, valuable writings on the history of Spain by Ibn Khaqan, Ibn Bassam, Ibn Bashkuwal, the geographer Idrisi, Ibn Jubayr, the eminent physician Ibn Zuhr, the Botanist Ibn 'I - Bayer of Malaga. The names of Ibnul-Khatib and Ibn Khaldun should also be mentioned here "whose writings represent the highest literary accomplishment and historical comprehension of which this age was capable."(13)

But Muslim culture spreaded itself over the Christian world not only from Spain, Sicily was also conquered by them.

Though the island fell into the hands of the Normans in 1071 A.D. the Court of Palermo retained a semi-oriental character. Under the reign of Frederick II of Hohenstaufen and his successors Arabic learning was communicated in the neighbouring towns of Lower Italy.

Thus it is established that the Andalusian poetry had a great deal of influence on the medieval European poetry particularly on the poetry of the province. "A treatise on love, written by the theologian Ibn Hazm of Cordova (d. 1064) called "The Dove's Neckring", seems to have had considerable influence on the concepts of medieval love in Europe and still has great appeal. Another Andalusian figure said to have influenced some medieval Christian writers is the Sufi (Islamic mystic), Ibn Arabi (d. 1240). His greatest influence, however, was on Islamic mysticism, and his thought had a determining effect, particularly on subsequent Persian mystic poets and philosophers." (14)

The preview of this discussion has been confined to the period up to 1450 A.D. for the sake of convenience. So no further study on the literary achievements of Arabia are being done in this regard as the subsequent Arabian literature was eventually influenced by the western ideas as it was influenced previously by the Hellenic ideas. Still the Arabian literature of the period of our study had its originality and its living heritage.

14. Etta Marnura - Arabic Literature; a living heritage, p. 69