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**Exile and Nostalgia in the Poetry of Abu Al'Ala Al M'arri**

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**Mr. Faisal Alhakem**, Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, India.

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**Abstract**

This paper delves into the themes of exile and nostalgia in the poetry of Abu Al'Ala Al M'arri, a renowned Arab poet and philosopher from the 11th century. Al M'arri's works are characterized by their profound reflections on the human condition, ethical principles, and the transient nature of existence. Central to his poetry are the themes of exile and nostalgia, which he explores with lyrical eloquence and philosophical depth. Through a close reading of selected poems by Al M'arri, this paper examines how the poet grapples with the experiences of exile and nostalgia, reflecting on the longing for a lost homeland, the pain of separation, and the search for belonging in a world marked by impermanence and change. Al M'arri's poetry reveals a deep sense of yearning for a utopian past, a place of harmony and beauty that exists only in memory and imagination.

**Keywords:** Exile, Nostalgia, Poetry, Al M'arri, Baghdad, Ma'arrat al-Nu'man.

**Introduction:**

Al-Ma'arri's unique form of exile can be explored by examining the various aspects of his life and the choices he made. His self-imposed exile encompassed not only physical aspects but also intellectual and social dimensions. He deliberately embraced a minimalist lifestyle, exhibiting strict frugality in matters of food, drink, and clothing. He chose to live in simplicity and eschewed the luxuries and excesses of the world. This ascetic approach can be seen as a form of self-imposed exile from the materialistic aspects of society, placing him in a state of detachment from worldly desires. (Ricard 24)

His philosophical and intellectual beliefs further contributed to his sense of exile. He was critical of religious dogmas and conventional beliefs, which isolated him from mainstream society and its established norms. His rejection of religious institutions and his unorthodox views on faith and God's existence set him apart from his contemporaries and subjected him to criticism and ostracism. His intellectual

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dissent and unconventional lifestyle choices created a social barrier between him and the society in which he lived. His views and writings often challenged prevailing societal values and traditions, leading to his exclusion from mainstream circles. This social alienation can be viewed as a form of exile, as he was marginalized and isolated due to his non-conformity.

### **Self-Imposed Exile**

Al-Ma'arri's exile extended to personal relationships and emotional attachments. He voluntarily renounced marriage and parenthood, denying himself the emotional connections and familial bonds that are integral to human existence. This intentional withdrawal from intimate relationships can be seen as a self-imposed exile from the emotional aspects of life. (Hayry and Sukenick 17)

By examining these aspects collectively, we can perceive Al-Ma'arri's unique form of exile as a conscious rejection of societal conventions, materialistic pursuits, and emotional attachments. Despite not experiencing literal banishment, his deliberate choices and philosophical outlook created a self-imposed exile that set him apart from his contemporaries and subjected him to a life of solitude, introspection, and intellectual exploration.

From this perspective, Al-Ma'arri's life can be regarded as an ever-renewing exile, assuming different manifestations in accordance with the temporal and spatial contexts he encountered. Exile inherently engenders a sense of yearning, yet Al-Ma'arri's yearning diverges from that of the general populace. His yearning was directed towards the realm of the hereafter and the departure from individuals whom he perceived as constricting and mired in delusion. Al-Ma'arri viewed their pursuits as futile, deeming life as a whole unworthy of eliciting laughter during moments of joy or tears during moments of sorrow. His yearning, therefore, transcended mundane attachments and gravitated towards a metaphysical realm, underscoring his profound philosophical and existential detachment from the conventional notions of happiness and grief.

Despite the aforementioned aspects, there are instances where Al-Ma'arri exhibits glimpses of common human emotions, particularly in the realm of nostalgia. We can observe him yearning for Damascus while residing in Baghdad. However, what is striking is that even in such circumstances, Al-Ma'arri continues to confound us. He expresses a longing for Baghdad, despite being situated in Damascus, his original homeland and the abode of his family and community. This occurrence is both remarkable and infrequent. Conventional expectations dictate that expatriates or exiles yearn for their homeland, reminiscing about the places of their youth, leisure, and play. Yet, Al-Ma'arri's yearning for a land of estrangement defies easy explanation, pointing to a complex psychological state within the poet that has perplexed people throughout the ages.

### **His Life In Baghdad**

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According to Alhamawi in *Mu'jam Albuldan* Abu al-Ala' al-Ma'arri left his hometown, Ma'arrat al-Nu'man, a prominent and ancient city situated between Aleppo and Hama. He undertook a journey to Baghdad in the year 398 AH (1007 CE), driven by a desire for intellectual pursuits and seeking knowledge. However, his sojourn in the capital city proved to be fraught with difficulties and psychological hardships, ultimately resulting in the failure of his expedition. Despite the initial intention to acquire knowledge, the challenges he encountered during his stay in Baghdad hindered the realization of his scholarly aspirations, leading to his eventual return to his place of origin (156).

Regardless of the adversities encountered in Baghdad, including the physical strain, exhaustion, and the derogatory treatment he endured due to his blindness, Abu al-Ala' al-Ma'arri exhibited remarkable resilience. One notable incident, often recounted, illustrates his linguistic prowess and sharp wit. As the story goes, while entering a mosque, he accidentally bumped into a man who derisively referred to him as a "dog." In a swift and clever response, Al-Ma'arri replied, "The dog is the one who is unaware of seventy names for a dog!" This poignant remark not only showcased his linguistic virtuosity but also highlighted his keen intellectual acumen and ability to navigate and command language with expertise. His profound knowledge and linguistic acuity remained undiminished, elevating him to the status of a walking linguistic compendium (Alhamawi 124).

In spite of the various perspectives on the matter, Abu al-Fada' asserts that Al-Ma'arri "derived knowledge from its [Baghdad's] scholars without apprenticing himself to any particular individual. Subsequently, he returned to Ma'arra and confined himself to his home"(176). This statement suggests that Al-Ma'arri availed himself of the intellectual resources offered by Baghdad's scholars but did not engage in a formal apprenticeship. It is evident that Al-Ma'arri developed an affinity for Baghdad, and he may have harbored a desire, deep within himself, to remain in the city despite the psychological distress caused by the indignities he endured, which heightened his sense of alienation. However, the reasons that prompted his departure from Baghdad are elucidated in the poem called "Talk of Alzawra" addressed to the judge al-Tanukhi:

Two things have stirred my heart, the first is a mother's love,  
Whom I never met, and riches faded like a fleeting dove.  
May Allah grant her life in blissful soul's embrace,  
Before she journeys to the graves, her destined resting place.

.....  
And death, it befriends the soul that finds solace,

In the noble contentment, shunning worldly chase (71-9).

Al-Ma'arri's departure from Baghdad can be attributed to two primary factors. Firstly, he received news of his mother's illness and her fervent desire to see him before her impending demise. Sensing the proximity of her end, he felt compelled to

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be by her side and bid her farewell. Secondly, his financial situation had deteriorated, resulting in a scarcity of blessings and provisions. The decline in his wealth likely influenced his decision to leave Baghdad. Despite his deep affection for Baghdad, he prioritized the opportunity to be with his mother in her final moments over his attachment to the city. He was imbued with an intense nostalgia for Baghdad once he decided to depart. Scarcely had he turned away from Baghdad when his very soul began to dissolve in the anguish of parting (Hussain 80). This sentiment is exemplified in his farewell poem to Baghdad "The Prophet of Crows":

I bid adieu, O denizens of Baghdad fair,  
Amidst sighs that carry the sting of despair.  
This parting was not of my own desire,  
But fate's burden, a trial I must bear.

Oh, wretched is the substitute (Syria/Sham), distant and unknown,  
Though they are my people, and share my zone.

O Baghdad, grant me a sip, a drop from your sacred stream,  
I wish I could have drained the mighty Tigris alone.

Yet, what is the Tigris to us in this plight,  
When distant from the blessings and cherished sight,  
We yearn for its waters, like a desert breeze,  
That quenches not our longing, day or night (47-58).

The sorrowful farewell to the people of Baghdad resonates with a profound longing that permeates Al-Ma'arri's heart, even before his physical departure. The intensity of his yearning is vividly portrayed through the poetic imagery of an overflowing lamentation, saturated with sighs that sear his soul like a relentless flame. These heartfelt expressions reveal his deep-seated impatience at the prospect of parting ways with Baghdad, the city that holds immense significance for him.

The departure from Baghdad, for Al-Ma'arri, is not a casual event but a momentous occasion laden with emotional weight. It is a separation that transcends mere physical distance, as it represents the relinquishment of a cherished homeland and a profound sense of identity. The attachment to Baghdad is so profound that even the inanimate objects seem to mourn the impending separation, underscoring the depth of his emotional bond with the city. In his farewell journey, Al-Ma'arri finds himself confronted with a disheartening reality, a substitute that fails to match the essence of Baghdad. The region of Sham, with Ma'arra al-Nu'man as its representative, is presented as an inadequate alternative, both culturally and emotionally, though it is original homeland with his own people. It is described as a dismal and scorned alternative, emphasizing the irreplaceable nature of Baghdad in his heart. The fact of the matter is that he harbors an ardent longing for Baghdad when he is in Ma'arra, and he is captivated by Ma'arra when he is situated in Baghdad (Hussain 81).

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In his poem "Pale Faces," Al-Ma'arri reveals a depth of emotion and attachment to Baghdad and Iraq. He emphasizes that his departure from Baghdad was not by choice but a circumstance that forced him to leave against his will. The visible pallor on his face symbolizes the profound sadness and grief he experienced due to this nostalgia, an outward reflection of the inner turmoil within his soul.

Let the pallor of our countenances suffice,  
A testament to our unwavering attachment, our hearts' entice.  
We have been bestowed with Iraq's sacred land,  
Yet divided we stand, unable to fully understand.  
We drank from the waters of the mighty Dijla's embrace,  
And beheld the majestic palm, nature's grace (1-6).

What makes his nostalgia for Iraq even more remarkable is the fact that his love for the land predates his personal acquaintance with it. This signifies a deep-rooted affinity and admiration that transcends mere familiarity. It suggests that even without firsthand experience, he had formed a profound connection to Iraq, drawn to its cultural heritage, natural beauty, and rich history. Al-Ma'arri bemoans his misfortune of visiting Iraq only in his later years, expressing a sense of regret and missed opportunity. He yearns for the chance to have experienced Iraq's wonders in the prime of his life, to fully immerse himself in the enchanting waters, flowing rivers, and majestic palm trees that grace the land. His desire to savor and cherish these aspects highlights his profound appreciation for the natural splendor and unique qualities that make Iraq a cherished place.

### **His Longing For His Homeland**

In Al-Ma'arri's renowned poem, "The Sublime Shining Light," we can discern a profound insight into his inclination to discuss the camel, which serves as a vehicle for his longing for his native land, Ma'arra al-Nu'man, while being situated in Baghdad, a city he has developed a deep affection for. This raises the question of how Al-Ma'arri reconciles his love for Baghdad with his attachment and nostalgia for his ancestral homeland. He skillfully navigates the delicate balance between his sentiments for Baghdad and his profound yearning for his native land. The camel assumes a symbolic role, embodying his connection to his homeland and evoking a sense of nostalgia.

They (Camels) yearn for the radiant lightning's glow,  
In Baghdad's embrace, both weak and low.  
Eyes turned towards it, as if they see,  
His fiery presence, from here to eternity.  
When distance separates, their secrets untold,  
They reach out to him, with heads of old.  
Their connection unbroken, through time and space,  
In yearning hearts, their souls embrace (1-8).

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The poet's invocation of camels and their inclination towards Ma'arra, as if they respond to the lightning's glow after a portion of the night has elapsed, alludes to their esteemed status. The poet employs this imagery as a vehicle to convey the sentiments of longing and nostalgia for his homeland, utilizing the camels as a symbolic representation of his emotional state. The desire for their heads to be severed and raised on lofty spears whenever they move away from Ma'arra echoes the intensity of his longing, suggesting an ardent yearning that transcends physical distance.

This poetic interplay between the camels and their homeland reflects the poet's shared motivation to return to his native land though he likes where he is now. The reference to camels as creatures that exhibit a profound attachment to their homelands aligns with the wisdom and cultural understanding surrounding these animals. It is well known among Arabs that the most noble of camels are those that possess the greatest longing for their homelands, and this might explain why the poet used camels to express his nostalgia (Aljahid 389).

Al-Ma'arri further narrates that his intention in visiting Iraq was solely for a noble purpose, namely the acquisition of knowledge. Unlike the renowned poet "Ghilan," who came to Prince Bilal ibn Abi Burdah with the explicit aim of seeking material gain, Al-Ma'arri emphasizes that he did not visit Baghdad with the same intentions. Instead, he highlights his own pursuit of knowledge and elevates his own stature, as his visit to Baghdad was not driven by a quest for wealth, despite his personal hardships and scarcity of resources. He also expresses his nostalgia for Ma'arra al-Nu'man, which he describes as the land of capitals. At times, he admits to having disregarded its significance, but his longing magnifies its value and elevates its status. This sentiment underscores the profound emotional attachment he holds towards his ancestral homeland:

In Iraq's embrace, I found solace anew,  
Unlike Ghilan, seeking worldly gains to pursue.  
By my own merits, I gained acclaim,  
Though distant from allies, and no wealth to name.  
Oh, how I lamented leaving the land of capitals,  
Realizing its worth, beyond material appraisals (51-6).

Subsequently, he wishes that Mount Senir, a mountain in the poet's homeland, could manifest itself to him and his company (the camels), while they are situated in Iraq. That might bring immense joy to their hearts, as their eyes delight in the idea of its proximity. Furthermore, the poet's yearning extends beyond mere proximity, as he expresses a profound desire to be carried swiftly to his homeland on the wings of a cloud. This imagery evokes a sense of longing and urgency, as he envisions himself soaring through the sky, propelled by the ethereal and transient nature of a cloud. He compares the cloud's wings to that of the ostrich, which is known

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for its swift movements. This comparison emphasizes the longing for a rapid reunion with his homeland:

Oh, if only Senir could emerge, unveiling its grandeur,  
To the company of mine, a spectacle so pure.  
With the grace of a gazelle, it would appear,  
Radiant and swift, like a fleeting cheer.  
And who am I to resist the cloud's gentle flight,  
Its wings, like a mother ostrich, spreading wide and bright.  
Oh, to be carried on its ethereal embrace,  
As it soars through the heavens, in celestial grace (87-94).

We observe also the poet's unreserved confession to the lightning originating from the land of Ma'arra, acknowledging that Al-Karkh (Iraq) is not his true abode, but rather, it is a place to which fate has led him. Subsequently, the poet earnestly beseeches this lightning, appealing for even a solitary droplet from the waters of Ma'arra, in the aspiration that it may satiate his thirst and assuage his deep yearning and nostalgic longing for his native land:

Oh, lightning! Alas, Al-Karkh is not my sacred space,  
Fate's hand has cast me here, in this displaced chase.  
Can you, perchance, possess a drop divine,  
From Ma'arra's waters, to quench this thirst of mine? (23-6).

Thus, Al-Ma'arri endured the anguish of longing for a different place, the one where he did not reside. He yearned for Al-Ma'arra while he was in Iraq, and when he found himself in Al-Ma'arra, he yearned for elsewhere. This predicament may have been a curse afflicting him or a trial peculiar to his being, owing to the weariness he experienced from life and the individuals it encompassed. He exhibited a transient nature, constantly desiring to transform his surroundings, to the extent that he reached a pinnacle where he yearned for death, seeking release from this existence and longing for passage into the realm of the hereafter, as previously expounded.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout his life, Al-Ma'arri resided in various locations, including Al-Karkh in Iraq and Al-Ma'arra in present-day Syria. However, regardless of his physical whereabouts, he remained consumed by an unquenchable yearning for something beyond his immediate surroundings. This yearning became a defining characteristic of his poetic and philosophical works.

It is worth noting that Al-Ma'arri's nostalgia can be seen as both a personal struggle and a reflection of the human condition. His dissatisfaction with life and the people he encountered may have contributed to his constant yearning for a different reality. He often expressed his disillusionment with societal norms, religious dogmas, and the transient nature of human existence. This profound longing and restlessness led Al-Ma'arri to contemplate the meaning of life, the transient nature of earthly

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existence, and the possibility of a higher realm beyond. He contemplated the afterlife, seeking solace and spiritual fulfillment in the hope of transcending the limitations of the physical world.

Al-Ma'arri's yearning serves as a significant reminder of the human quest for meaning and purpose. It encapsulates the universal longing for a deeper connection and a sense of belonging that extends beyond the confines of time and place. His poetry and philosophical musings continue to resonate with readers, as they reflect the timeless struggle of the human soul in search of fulfillment and transcendence.

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