

## Arabian Chivalry and its advent into English Romance

**Fayaz Sultan Dar**

Assistant professor English,  
Department of English Islamic University of Science  
And Technology,  
Awantipora Kashmir, India

### Abstract

Arabs are known to the world as a tribe of nomads fighting among themselves bereft of any traits of 'civilized' nations. This narrative has come down to us from the oriental perspective, however there are so many loopholes in this frame of reference, that modern day scholars feel the need to unearth the truth behind the socio-political fabric of Arabs, long forgotten in the so called secular history. The rich literary tradition of Arabs needs to be studied and brought to light. Albert Hourani in his book, A History of the Arab Peoples rightly says, "In the seventh century the Arabs created a new world into which other peoples were drawn" (123). The statement is woven specifically in the context of bringing to the world a new religion that is Islam with a stable socio-political order. The present study has the primary focus of unearthing the very genesis of chivalry (*Al-furusiyyah al-arabiya*) and its importance in Arab life down the ages. Chivalry as a social institution has its roots in the far deserts of Arabia. The common *literati* believe that chivalry is primarily a western genre of romance literature. However the fact remains that it trickled into the European literary landscape after the Spanish conquest. It was the year A.D 711 when Tariq bin Ziyad through the rock of Gibraltar changed the course of European history for ever by grafting the seeds of intellect and progress into the West. The Spanish conquest brought Europe back from the dark ages which had bed-ridden it for many hundred years. Arabs brought with them a new social set up and political order which Europe was lacking on account of rise of Visigoths and mercenaries. Muslims brought with them books of medicine, mathematics, commerce and above all a stable political order to Spain. It was here when the East met the West and transformed the later forever. Arab way of life was channeled into the West through the literary works of poets and roaming troubadours. The present study has a focus to trace the origin of chivalry back to the Arabian Peninsula and how it was adopted by western society in their literary tradition.

**Keywords-** Oriental, Chivalry, Gibraltar, Visigoths, Literati, Troubadours, Peninsula

## **Introduction**

Literary movements which are deeply grounded in social practices are evolutionary in nature in contrast to political upheavals, which we can fix as revolutionary in taste. For example 14 July 1789 is the day when the walls of Bastille were razed to the ground and French monarchy annihilated for-ever. Such clinical precision is not available when it comes to think of any literary phenomenon which is slow and decentralized in time and space. Arabian Peninsula which is geographically cut off from the outside by its tough terrain and climate has remained a forbidden territory. This distant culture has given the world a number of things like Arabian numerals, medicine, cartography and many other things. The Arab way of life is deeply grounded in its social and literary practices where traits of courage, wit and aesthetics ho hand in hand. Surviving in such a difficult terrain demanded wisdom and strength. Arabs had both and survived the test of time and carried on this legacy from generation to generation. In the middle of this one cannot forget to mention the deep accord between social practices and literary practices which exerted a deep influence over all the spheres of Arab life. Arabian chivalry was one of such practices which percolated deep in the Arab aesthetics. Europe owes a lot to this martial race in terms of its artistic taste. One cannot do a faithful study of medieval Europe without tracing the common area of intersection between the East and the West.

Maria Rosa Menocal, who is a sterling professor of the humanities at Yale University in her book, *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten Heritage* writes,

Arabic culture was a central and shaping phenomenon in medieval Europe, yet its influence on the medieval literature has been ignored for the last two centuries. Arabic culture had its presence in a variety of key settings, including the courts of William of Aquitaine and Frederick II, the universities in London, Paris and Bologna, and Cluny under peter the venerable. The perception of specific texts including the courtly love lyrics and the works of Dante and Boccaccio would be altered by an acknowledgement of the Arabic cultural component. (121)

Arabs are known to be the people with a rich legacy of the oral literature. Arab chieftains used to organize poetic competitions around bonfires which helped them to pass on the legacy of oral literature down to their young ones in line. The tales of heroes and mythical figures shaped the lives of Arabs and over a period of time this tradition gave birth to a particular way of life enjoyed by the bravest and adventure loving people. Over a period of time the life of extraordinary people who fought bravely and were known for their justice and prudence was transformed and eulogized through oral songs. The richness of Arab life in the ancient times stood high and deep upon this grand scheme where valor and wit were the trademark of the Arab life.

John Kosegarten who is an authority on the oral and folk literature of Arabia and has extensively written on the oral literary tradition rightly says:

The poetry of the Arabs, in the ages which preceded the rise of Islamism, was perpetuated by oral tradition; for in ancient times, when writing was not used or scarcely used, memory was exercised and strengthened to a degree now almost unknown. In those countries of Arabia where Arabian poetry may be justly considered to have had its origin or to have attained its earliest growth, there lived reciters, or *Rawis*, as the Arabs called them, who got by heart numerous songs of their poets, and recited them, occasionally, in public assemblies and private parties. (87)

As mentioned earlier Arab way of life was deeply rooted in a system of customs and rituals like poetic completions and large bonfires in the middle of the deserts. It was a custom and of great importance to show hospitality when the guests were received by the hosts. In this atmosphere, hospitality demanded wine, meat and music. It's next to impossible to believe such a life was silent and devoid of any artistic truth but shone bright with long serious beautiful extravaganza. Poets ruled and common folks listened and memorized the revealed words and talent was passed to the next in line. It was this great legacy which Muslims brought to Spain after the dawn of Islam in the peninsula. Spanish conquest is a lesser known fact in the world today. The mainstream historians of Spain recognize Muslim chapter as a transitory period. For them Arabs were nothing but tourists who came and left. There is a least recognition of contribution of Muslims in European prosperity. The European narrative is just giving it the space of a foot note in the history of West. The present study has a mandate to reread history and bring forth the truth. Stanley Lane Poole, who is quite affirmative of the Muslim conquest of Spain as a prelude to the golden era of Europe in his book *The Muslims in Spain* writes,

For centuries Spain had been the centre of civilization, the seat of arts and learning and every form of refined enlightenment. No other country in Europe had so far approached the cultivated dominions of the moors. The brief brilliancy of Isabella and Ferdinand, and of the empire of Charles, could found no such enduring prominence. The Moors were banished: for a while Christian Spain shone, like the moon with a borrowed light, then came the eclipse, and in that darkness Spain has groveled ever since. (145)

It's quite interesting to see how Poole, is honestly and judiciously accepting the truth unlike some pseudo-scholars, who are bent at historiographical distortion. It was the light of wisdom and knowledge with which the dark skinned illumined the light skinned and lifted the veil of despondency from Spain. The era of European progress in terms of intellectual and material wealth had started. As said earlier, the contact of the European world with the Arabian world was highly beneficial for the

literary explosion as it nurtured novel grounds of art and aesthetics. Arab literary world looked like a flower and the European world like an industrious bee engaged in imbibing beauty out of it. In this context a particular sect played a key role in transmitting seeds of new art and aesthetics. They were what west wind is to the new spring- harbingers of new joy. French troubadours, who roamed from place to place in Europe with music and acting as their forte saw the new antics in Andalusia and imbibed the devices to pass on. When they came in contact with the Arab people, they were influenced by the narratives and mythical figures and over a period of time welded these songs in their own native language. This was something new for them and they cherished such legendary tales of princes and princesses haunted places and the worlds of fantasy. These roaming troubadours took with them the chivalric characters and slowly it made its way into the mainstream European literature. The early medieval troubadours travelled from one village to the next and many also travelled abroad. Some travelled to the major cities of Europe whilst other medieval troubadours travelled to the Holy Land, accompanying the people who went on crusades. The travelling of the early medieval troubadours allowed them to spread the latest news. The themes of the songs sung by the medieval troubadours mainly dealt with Chivalry and courtly love - romantic ballads. The troubadours would play for royalty, lords and nobles. The songs of troubadours played a key role in shaping a new genre which merged love, courage, adversity and supernatural. This was the birth of romance. Writing about these engagements, one of the mainstream Arab literary historians maintains:

The Arab nomads were passionate poets and every incident of these chivalrous encounters were immortalized in verse and recited every night around the campfires which flickered in the empty vastness of the desert peninsula. (Glubb 212)

One cannot understand the richness and true sense of romance without looking at the Arab socio-economic stratification, where nomadic life was favorable for prosperity as it guaranteed new pastures and new territories unlike stagnation which meant adversity and ultimate end. It's this character that makes the Arabian shepherd a firm athlete who could ride the horse and do anything to win the lady love in question at any cost. His, was a gifted memory-which guaranteed the knowledge of timid bends and the stars at night. He was the one whose skills defined the fate of his clan. As every clan was under the leadership of a clan master, Arabs knew the fruits of remaining in clans defined by their own rules and ethics. Romance emerged out of this socio-cultural appendage and became over a period of time a means of catharsis where in poets could give a pent up to their otherwise stringent emotions. They were loved and lauded for this craft.

Romance is probably the mode of writing that modern audiences most readily associate with the middle Ages. Etymologically the term derives from the French *romanz*, which initially designated the narrative works composed in the vernacular that first appeared in 12th-century France. Texts

usually described as “romance” typically concern chivalry, questing, romantic love, and magic. There are also various subgenres that fall under the heading of medieval romance such as Arthurian romance. One of the classical examples that substantiates, the roots of chivalry with Arabian deserts is the life of El-Cid. It was only after the advent of Muslims in Spain that we see a glimpse of the chivalry in the Christian world. No Anglo-Saxon text or any other text celebrates such a way of life as an Arab enjoyed in Arabian tough terrain.

The life of El Cid, the heroic figure in Spanish literature is a testament to the fact that his life was modeled on the life of moors. In 1081, El Cid went on to offer his services to the Moorish king of the northeast Al-Andalus city of Zaragoza, Yusuf al-Mu'taman ibn Hud, and served both him and his successor, Al-Mustain II. He was given the title El Cid (The Master) and served as a leading figure in a diverse Moorish force consisting of Muladis, Berbers, Arabs and Malians. Today if we visit any Spanish household, hardly there happens to any one unfamiliar with El Cid as he is a cultural icon of Spaniards known for his bravery and chivalric traits which he himself learnt in the courts of moors.

The ethical and romantic characteristic of al-furusiyyah al-arabiya (Arabian chivalry) has a long history in Arabian Peninsula, as it was an integral part of the life of Arabs. It evolved and spread with the Muslim expansion. During the Arab era of crusades in the Iberian Peninsula, chivalry with all its attributes was transferred to Western Europe as a contagious disease. European literary tradition lacked at that time the avant-garde in it. As soon as Europe saw a new culture it was mesmerized in every aspect. Today pseudo historians are negating any affiliation with the Muslim roots vis-a-vis cultural and literary mentoring through the dark skinned that once brought Europe out of the dark ages and polished their wheels towards prosperity.

When we today read any medieval European text, we feel mesmerized with its novelty and ingenuity and believe that Englishmen were pioneers in such sublime themes but on a closer look we see that its roots are somewhere else. Romantic chivalry as pursued in medieval Europe is nothing more than the continuation of Al-furusiyyah Al-arabiya. Abanese, a Spanish writer couldn't help himself but is all praise in acknowledging the fact that Europe had not known the arts and practices of knighthood before the arrival to Andalusia of Arabs with their knights and heroes: a logical hypothesis in that chivalry had not been known to the Greeks and Romans, it is because almost all the known genres that we see in English literature trickled from the Graeco-Roman lands. Such was the influence the Christians even if they disliked the Muslim authority were hegemonised by this sophistication both in arts and daily life. This offshoot of the chivalrous life of the Arab and Muslim conquerors in the Iberian Peninsula, both in theory and manner, was never outdone by the European Christians in any form be it literature or any other form of arts.

“The European chivalry of the Middle Ages was learned from the Spanish Moors.” (Burckhardt 87). He maintains that the glorification of women and the depiction of noble knights with their many virtues came about as a result of the impact of the Arab qualities in battles, literature and daily lives-characteristics not familiar in the world of Christendom (in the 7<sup>th</sup> through the 10<sup>th</sup> century). Chivalry was the most prominent characteristic of the Moors in the Iberian Peninsula. To all Arabs in that era, to become a genuine faris (knight), a man had to attain attributes of dignity, eloquence, gentleness, horsemanship, physical strength, poetic talent and mastery in the bow and arrow, spear and sword. These virtues were transferred by way of the Iberian Peninsula to the remainder of Europe. Romantic Hispano-Arabic literary forms, such as the love songs of the *muwashshah* (a form of poetry), were forerunners to the songs of the troubadours which gave birth to medieval knighthood and the age of Chivalry.

A historian once wrote that the genius of the Arabs was poetic and their songsters in the Iberian Peninsula outnumbered those of all other peoples put together. El-Cid, who was greatly influenced by Moorish culture, especially its poetry, composed a poem which is the oldest and finest ballad of medieval Spanish verse and is said to have given birth to the songs of chivalry in Christian Spain. While some of Arabic poetry was sensual and pleasure-seeking, it was the romantic components that were adopted by the Provençal troubadours from the Arab courts in Andalusia. This poetic genre combined with the Christian honor to the Virgin Mary was behind a good part of the medieval concept of chivalry.

European chivalry also gained much from contact with the Arabs during the Crusades. From among the many incidents during these long conflicts are those which relate to Saladin and which become renowned. To the Europeans, Saladin was the perfect example of cultured chivalry. When the Crusaders captured Jerusalem in 1099 A.D, they slaughtered virtually all the inhabitants. When Saladin, well-known for his kindness to prisoners taken in battle, re-took the city in 1187, he spared his victims, giving them safe passage to leave. Despite his fierce opposition to the Crusading powers, Saladin achieved a great reputation in Europe as a chivalrous knight. When his foe Richard the Lion heart, leader of the Christian armies, became sick, Saladin sent his personal physician to heal him. There is no doubt that the Crusaders learned from him a great deal about chivalry. During the 14th century, an epic poem about Saladin was circulated in Europe, and Dante included him among the virtuous pagan souls in limbo in his *Inferno*. This is also an interesting aspect which poets like Dante popularized.

When one reads today of the nobility of a knight in shining armor rushing to rescue a maiden in distress, it is well to remember that behind the nobility of his act are the Arabs who laid the basis of

his action. Perhaps, no one has described the impact of Arab al-furusiyyah and muru'ah on European chivalry better than R.A. Nicholson who writes in A Literary History of the Arabs:

The chivalry of the Middle Ages is, perhaps, ultimately traceable to heathen Arabia. Knight-errantry, the riding forth on horseback in search of adventures, the rescue of captive maidens, the succor rendered everywhere to women in adversity — all these were essentially Arabian ideas, as was the very name of chivalry, the connection of honorable conduct with the horse-rider, the man of noble blood, the cavalier ... But the nobility of the women is not only reflected in the heroism and devotion of the men; it stands recorded in song, in legend and in history. Chivalry began in a secular Arabia where the tribal code of honor with all its ramifications was the basis of right and wrong. Heroes were those who exemplified the characteristics of the chivalrous attributes in that society. It was so important that as Islam enveloped the area, it remained part of the new social order of life and continued as part of the human code of life with the conquests of new territory. As such, chivalry became part of the many Arab contributions to the West. (235).

The Arabs are said to have been the first people to practice chivalry in their way of life and conflicts. Unlike those of other nations like the Greeks, Romans and Persians, Arab wars were usually fought for glory according a strict code of conduct and honor. They were fought fairly and, at most times, without treachery. Champions fought before both armies and battles often took place by appointment. As late as 1492 when the Christians captured Granada, the Muslim champions came out before the battle to challenge their Spanish counterparts. Writing about such adventure loving race John Glubb asserts in his book, *The Great Arab Conquests* writes: “The Arab nomads were passionate poets and every incident of these chivalrous encounters were immortalized in verse and recited every night around the campfires which flickered in the empty vastness of the desert peninsula”

Arabian chivalry was a code of ethics, life and an important aspect of social structure. It evolved to become synonymous with the quest for freedom and justice as well as a man fighting to the death for his womenfolk. During war, women often accompanied their men to battle, but they were usually stationed behind the lines. In the light of John Glubb's assessment, one can safely say that chivalry as a genre was an important institution redefined by valor and romance. One has to be faithful while tracing the seeds of such a great genre from Arabian Peninsula to medieval Europe. Modern day scholars of literature need to come out of hypocritical readings that banish Arabs as barbaric and bereft of any aesthetic taste. One can safely arrive at this conclusion that Arabs in the past were centuries ahead in their literary arena than retrogressive Europe of the dark ages.

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