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Obscene Mockery of Women in Ancient Anthologies of Arabic Poetry: A Cultural Study

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Abstract
Sarcasm, as a rhetorical style, inherently contains the meaning of mockery, which itself carries intentional implications. In such cases, the surface of the speech contradicts its underlying meaning. Creators often use sarcasm as a way to reject social or political realities or as a means to engage in introspection and self-dialogue, driven by subconscious thoughts shaped by inherited or acquired cultural references. Sarcasm does not usually appear overtly; rather, language and its artistic expressions play a role in cloaking it with humorous or mocking tones. Thus, the reader often encounters meanings different from those the text seems to suggest. A perceptive reader relies on modern cultural methodologies that delve beyond the text to uncover these masks and highlight their implications.
This study focuses on a crucial hypothesis: that anthologies of Arabic poetry are ideologically biased in their portrayal of women, particularly in sarcastic contexts, and heavily favor a patriarchal viewpoint.

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Introduction

Sarcasm, functionally, is a form of satire; however, it differs in nature. Sarcasm is indirect, while satire is direct. Both stem from the same source as humor, and at times, the reader may struggle to distinguish between them.
Sarcasm is a psychological phenomenon—one that exists within the healthy human nature. People use it as a means to escape the burdens of life. It has a distinct presence in Arabic literature, mostly characterized by humor and laughter. It also serves as a weapon against adversaries. Yet, it differs from derision and ridicule in that its aim is to humiliate and demean the mocked individual, often with their knowledge—or sometimes without it. Rhetorically, sarcasm is a method of speech in which a person expresses the opposite of what they truly mean, such as telling a miser, "How generous you are," or expressing sorrow ironically by saying, "How fortunate I am."
Sarcasm emerged during the Abbasid era as a literary genre reflecting a break from the past. It was a vivid expression of the new tragedies of life. It symbolized alienation and a disguised rejection of social realities. It became a defensive mechanism that gradually expanded and even permeated religious values and philosophical outlooks on life among some Abbasid poets, serving as protection against the social denigration they endured. It was thus a defensive, rather than purely offensive, literary device.
The female—this active component of society—has long fought to claim her space and assert herself in open defiance of patriarchal desires. The Arab poet could not separate the image of the woman from his poetic ambitions. Through her, he found the means to pride and masculine glory, expressed through courage and generosity. To maintain this pursuit, poets adopted a persistent attitude grounded in a dominant cultural view that perceived women as inferior—a view that became widely ingrained in society and was passed down as a cultural norm. This vision reduced women to emotional beings and dismissed their hopes of playing a civilizational role.
Modern cultural studies have challenged the structuralist approach that centers the text as an isolated entity. Instead, texts are now seen as tools for uncovering ideologies and their embedded cultural patterns.

When it comes to literary portrayals of women, these texts reveal the cultural codes, origins, and collective consciousness of a society.

The researcher argues that sarcastic depictions of women, particularly those using obscene or sexually explicit language, are prevalent in classical Arabic poetry and have deeply rooted themselves in the Arab male's unconscious. These portrayals have been widely circulated, forming an aesthetic taste that endured across generations and shaped the cultural memory—a concept defined as the external dimension of human memory, composed of both cultural content and a connection to the past. Cultural memory ensures the continuity of a society's identity by transmitting its values and images from one generation to the next.

These images do not belong to a single poet. Rather, they were selected by scholars and anthologists across various historical periods and compiled in poetic anthologies presented to both rulers and the public. These compilations, known as "poetic selections" or "tadhkira" (memoirs), will be explored through a cultural lens to uncover their ideological dimensions.

This study thus leads us to an explicit theme: the sexual mockery of women's bodies, which reflects both literal insult and deeper ideological underpinnings. The female body becomes a rhetorical construct—a symbolic model that exists in the male mind, shaped by sensory perceptions and aesthetic norms.

First Topic: Images of Sarcastic Mockery (تهكم)

Sarcastic mockery is a clear form of satire. It usually takes the form of an implicit or explicit claim made by the mocker toward others—not directed inward. The mocker is often seen as arrogant, aggressive, and harmful. The mockery itself is forceful and intrusive.

An example of such sarcasm is found in the poetry of Di'bil al-Khuza'i (d. 246 AH) in the al-Basīṭ meter:

> "May God not bless a night that brings me close
> To lying with a woman like a coarse rope.
> I touched her naked body, but found
> Nothing beneath my hand but bones.
> In every part of her body a bone strikes
> The body of the sleeper, making him weak and feeble."

These lines appear in Di'bil's Diwan, possibly addressed to his wife. The same verses are also found in al-Hamāsa by al-Marzūqī, Tashbīhāt by Ibn 'Awf under the chapter on satirizing women, and in al-Tadhkira al-Ḥamdūniyya by Ibn Hamdūn. Additionally, they are cited in 'Uyūn al-Akhbār by Ibn Qutayba in the chapter on old men and infirmity.

The imagery in these lines is explicit in describing sexual organs and physical unattractiveness. The target of mockery is the woman, and the poet highlights everything repulsive about her physical form—what repels rather than attracts a man.

Al-Marzūqī's commentary breaks down the metaphors:

"Dalk" refers to rubbing or massaging.
"Mased" is a rope made from twisted fibers.
"I touched her naked body" suggests he felt nothing but protruding bones, emphasizing her thinness.
The bones are compared to pegs or stakes.
The motion of the bones during sleep is likened to being struck or pushed.

Ibn Hamdūn, in his collection, justifies including such imagery not for vulgarity's sake but for its linguistic elegance and rhetorical beauty. He says:

> "The purpose of satire here is to appreciate its wit, eloquent words, and novel meanings—not to slander or disgrace."

However, satire can stem from personal motives and becomes mere insult when detached from societal critique. When the audience is entertained, it is often because of the novelty and comedic value, not the message.

Although the poetic anthologies vary in naming the chapters where such images are found, they share one trait: they ridicule women through references to sexual anatomy.

Second Topic: Images of Derision (الاستهزاء)

If sarcasm represents an indirect expression of contradiction—between word and context, or between literal and intended meaning—then derision is a harsher, more contemptuous form of mockery. It typically manifests through blunt, scornful language, often filled with disdain and aimed at humiliating or degrading its subject.

Ibn al-'Adīm, in his poetic selections, favored images filled with frivolity and indulgence, using licentious expressions that reflect a loss of moral values. One such image is found in a verse attributed to Ibn al-Ḥajjāj, as quoted in Ma'āhid al-Tanṣīṣ:

> She said—and I had asked her to play with it
> Gently, as the others were asleep—
> Had Isrāfīl himself been in my palm,
> Trying to blow into it… he wouldn't rise!

This poem, attributed to the poet Ibn al-Ḥajjāj, appears in his biography and was considered a form of refined licentiousness. Though seemingly vulgar, its verbal fluency and cleverness earned it a place in anthologies. It also enjoyed popularity among kings and nobles as a source of amusement and laughter.

Compared to the selections of Ibn Hamdūn, al-'Ubaydī, and al-Irbilī, Ibn al-'Adīm's chosen imagery was more colloquial and easier in language—yet it shared the same intent: reducing women to mere objects of derision and physical ridicule, with minimal attention paid to behavioral or psychological depth.

Obscene portrayals of women in Arabic poetry were especially prevalent during the Abbasid period, a time marked by increased literary documentation. Many of these vulgar images were attributed to earlier eras (such as the Jahiliyyah), even though pre-Islamic poetry often described women's bodies with restraint and modesty. Explicit objectification was largely the product of later, morally looser eras.

The anthologists' focus on women's physicality—while disregarding other attributes—reflects a deeply rooted masculine taste, one that dates back to the pre-Islamic period. For example, the pre-Islamic poet's metaphors about women often revolved around utility and gratification within the male-female dynamic.

Al-'Ubaydī, in his Tadhkira, included verses that feature blatant sexual ridicule and even accusations of indecency. One such example comes from the poet al-Farazdaq, introduced by al-'Ubaydī with the line: "There is no match to the meaning of this one":

> She threatened me as she approached me in her robe,
And it rustled like wind in the trees.
Then she met me with something blunt—no weapon—
Like a bull's nostril trapped among the cows.
A pomegranate inside her trembled and split,
As if igniting a fire on the Night of Destiny.
Like the faces of two angry Turks,
Exposed to stabs, unshielded.
Will they withstand its heat (...) if they comply,
While the stabber presses on, determined to win?

These verses, part of a poem in which al-Farazdaq insults Jarīr by feminizing him, are filled with extreme vulgarity and sexual ridicule.

Some Arab critics did not consider such sarcastic portrayals—especially of women with physical impairments—as morally blameworthy. For them, writing was a matter of taste, and poetic selection reflected the mind of the selector. As the saying goes:

> "A man's choices are pieces of his mind."

Taste is influenced by intellectual trends and cultural values, which explains the variations in selection criteria—not only across individuals but also across regions and professions.

Al-Jāḥiẓ once said:

> "I never sat with a Baghdadi who, when quoting poetry, didn't begin with romantic verse. I never saw grammarians value poetry unless it was linguistically complex."

Many did not see the sharing of sexually charged sarcastic verses as sinful, especially when the goal was entertainment or artistic pleasure.

Ibn Qutaybah elaborated:

> "If you come across a report that explicitly names a private part or sexual act, do not let false modesty compel you to turn away or frown. The names of body parts are not sinful in themselves. Sin lies in slander, false testimony, lies, and backbiting."

Thus, al-'Ubaydī's selection of verses that ridicule women's sexual organs was not always aimed at degradation—it was often meant to arouse interest and provoke attention.

Conclusion

It is evident to those specialized in literary and humanistic studies that women have always been, and continue to be, one of the most prominent subjects in literary arts. The topics addressing women have gone beyond physical appearance and beauty to include deeper, more meaningful dimensions. In many of these studies, we find a distinct cultural perspective and aesthetic taste that shape how women are viewed—this significant being who completes and complements man.

In this study, we followed the inclinations and motivations behind the literary taste of ancient Arab writers and critics, particularly in how they reflect their negative cultural attitudes toward women. Traditionally, poetic description focused on what is beautiful and desirable in a woman—her wide eyes, fair cheeks, and graceful figure. However, over time, such portrayals shifted to highlight ugliness and distorted images of women.

If beauty and charm represent a positive human aesthetic of women, then the opposing images reflect a negative aesthetic—one in which male anthologists deliberately selected verses that ridicule women's appearances and make them the subject of sarcasm and derision. Through tracing these selected poems in ancient Arabic anthologies, we were able to uncover the male poetic taste, the reasons behind these selections, and the angles from which men viewed women.

It is worth noting that not all portrayals of women in poetry were motivated by mockery or ridicule. Some verses served as a linguistic record of old Arabic terms for male and female genitalia. Others were immediate emotional responses—expressions of a man's anger toward his wife for some reason—and thus did not represent widespread societal norms or dominant cultural beliefs.

Likewise, poetic anthologies that included such explicit imagery often reflected individual behavior by certain poets who used this type of imagery for humor and entertainment, rather than to reflect any collective or ideological view of women in society.

We hope that this study has helped illuminate one particular facet of Arabic literary heritage and opened the door for readers to explore other dimensions of our rich cultural history.

Throughout Arab history, women have also been portrayed in brilliant and dignified ways in literary arts. They have embodied symbols of beauty, charm, and generosity. In fact, men across various eras of Arabic literature often portrayed women as muses and emotional inspirations, attributing to them the finest qualities of nature and life: the radiant flower with a fragrant scent, the ripe fruit with delicious taste, and even, on a deeper symbolic level, the sun, the moon, and the earth itself.

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