



Arabic Love Poetry and Bengali Love Poetry

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a comparative study of Arabic and Bengali love poetry, examining its evolution from classical traditions to modern literary expressions. Love poetry has occupied a central position in both Arabic and Bengali literary histories, functioning not only as an aesthetic genre but also as a reflection of social values, moral frameworks, and emotional consciousness. The study explores how classical Arabic love poetry, shaped by tribal ethics, chivalric ideals, and later mystical interpretations, compares with Bengali love poetry rooted in devotional traditions, romantic humanism, and social realism. By tracing the transformation of love poetry in both traditions, this research highlights how modern poets redefined love as a site of individual freedom, emotional resistance, and social critique. Using a comparative and historical approach, the article argues that despite cultural and linguistic differences, Arabic and Bengali love poetry share a common trajectory—from collective ideals to personal experience—revealing the universal human dimensions of love, desire, and emotional expression.

1. Introduction

Love poetry has remained one of the most enduring and influential genres in world literature, serving as a powerful medium for expressing human emotions, cultural ideals, and social values. In both Arabic and Bengali literary traditions, love poetry has functioned not merely as lyrical expression but as a cultural discourse shaped by history, religion, ethics, and evolving notions of the self. From the deserts of pre-Islamic Arabia to the devotional landscapes of Bengal, love poetry has articulated ideals of beauty,



longing, separation, and emotional devotion in ways that reflect broader social transformations. Arabic love poetry developed within a complex cultural framework that initially emphasized tribal honor, loyalty, and restraint, later expanding into urban sophistication, mystical symbolism, and philosophical depth. Bengali love poetry, on the other hand, emerged from a synthesis of devotional spirituality, humanistic emotion, and romantic imagination, deeply influenced by Bhakti traditions and later by modern sensibilities shaped by colonial and post-colonial experiences.

This study aims to compare Arabic and Bengali love poetry across historical phases, focusing on how traditional poetic conventions were gradually transformed in response to changing social and cultural realities. By examining this transition from tradition to modernity, the article seeks to highlight both the distinctive features of each literary tradition and their shared human concerns.

2. Methodology and Comparative Framework

The present study adopts a comparative literary methodology, combining historical analysis with close textual reading. Rather than treating Arabic and Bengali love poetry as isolated traditions, the research places them in dialogue to explore thematic, stylistic, and ideological parallels. The comparative approach allows for an examination of how similar emotional experiences—such as longing, desire, separation, and union—are articulated through different cultural and poetic frameworks. The study draws upon classical and modern poetic texts, alongside secondary critical scholarship, to trace the evolution of love poetry in both traditions. Special attention is given to the role of social norms, religious influences, and changing conceptions of individuality in shaping poetic expression. This methodological framework enables a nuanced understanding of how love poetry functions as both a literary genre and a cultural phenomenon.

3. Classical Arabic Love Poetry: Ideals, Restraint, and Emotional Discipline

Classical Arabic love poetry, particularly in its early manifestations, was deeply embedded in the ethical and social values of tribal society. Pre-Islamic love poetry often emphasized emotional restraint, loyalty, and unfulfilled longing, reflecting a cultural emphasis on honor and social boundaries. Love was frequently portrayed as a noble suffering, where separation and endurance became markers of moral strength rather than emotional weakness. With the rise of Islamic civilization and urban culture, Arabic love poetry underwent significant transformation. Urban poets introduced greater emotional complexity and psychological depth, while maintaining a strong sense of poetic discipline. Love poetry became more introspective, exploring inner conflict and emotional vulnerability. At the same time, mystical



interpretations of love emerged, particularly in Sufi poetry, where human love was reimagined as a metaphor for divine longing. This spiritualization of love added philosophical depth to Arabic poetic tradition, expanding its thematic scope beyond personal emotion to universal transcendence.

Despite these developments, classical Arabic love poetry largely retained a sense of emotional control and symbolic expression. Love was often idealized rather than openly embodied, shaped by social expectations and ethical constraints. This balance between passion and restraint defined the classical Arabic poetic imagination.

4. Classical Bengali Love Poetry: Devotion, Emotion, and Spiritual Intimacy

In contrast to the Arabic tradition, classical Bengali love poetry evolved within a cultural environment deeply influenced by devotional spirituality and emotional expressiveness. The Bhakti movement played a crucial role in shaping Bengali poetic sensibility, presenting love as an intense emotional bond between the devotee and the divine. This devotional framework allowed poets to explore longing, separation, and union with remarkable emotional openness. Bengali love poetry often blurred the boundaries between human and divine love, using romantic imagery to convey spiritual experience. Unlike the restrained tone of classical Arabic love poetry, Bengali poetic expression tended to emphasize emotional intensity, vulnerability, and surrender. Love was not merely an ethical ideal but a transformative force capable of reshaping the self. At the same time, Bengali love poetry developed a strong humanistic dimension, celebrating emotional intimacy and personal connection. This emphasis on emotional authenticity laid the foundation for later romantic and modern poetic expressions. Classical Bengali poets thus created a tradition in which love functioned as both spiritual devotion and deeply human experience.

5. Transition to Modernity: Changing Social and Literary Contexts

The transition from traditional to modern love poetry in both Arabic and Bengali literatures was not merely a stylistic shift but a profound transformation shaped by historical, social, and intellectual changes. Modernity brought with it new conceptions of the self, individuality, and emotional freedom, challenging long-established poetic conventions. In both traditions, the emergence of modern love poetry coincided with periods of political upheaval, colonial encounters, urbanization, and the questioning of inherited moral frameworks. In the Arab world, the decline of traditional structures and the encounter with Western modernity led poets to reassess classical poetic forms and themes. Love poetry gradually moved away from idealized restraint and symbolic abstraction toward more personal, emotionally direct expression. Similarly, in Bengal, colonial modernity and the rise of new intellectual movements



transformed love poetry from devotional and romantic idealism into a space for individual emotion, social critique, and psychological exploration. In both traditions, modernity redefined love as an experience rooted in personal consciousness rather than collective ideals.

6. Modern Arabic Love Poetry: Individuality and Emotional Freedom

Modern Arabic love poetry represents a decisive break from classical norms of emotional restraint and rhetorical formality. Poets of the modern era foregrounded the individual self, transforming love into a deeply personal and often rebellious experience. Love was no longer confined to idealized longing or symbolic distance; instead, it became a space for emotional honesty, desire, vulnerability, and even protest against social conservatism. Modern Arabic poets often used love poetry to challenge rigid moral codes and patriarchal norms, presenting love as a form of liberation from emotional repression. The beloved was no longer a distant, idealized figure but a presence associated with intimacy, companionship, and emotional equality. This shift also influenced poetic language, which became simpler, more direct, and closer to everyday speech. Through this linguistic transformation, modern Arabic love poetry expanded its audience and intensified its emotional impact.

At the same time, modern Arabic love poetry retained traces of its classical heritage, particularly in its use of metaphor and symbolic resonance. However, these elements were reinterpreted through a modern sensibility that prioritized personal experience over inherited convention. Love thus became both an emotional and cultural statement, reflecting broader struggles for freedom, identity, and self-expression in modern Arab societies.

7. Modern Bengali Love Poetry: Emotion, Individualism, and Humanism

Modern Bengali love poetry likewise underwent a significant transformation, shaped by romanticism, humanism, and later by social realism. While classical Bengali love poetry was deeply intertwined with devotional spirituality, modern poets increasingly emphasized human relationships, emotional complexity, and psychological depth. Love was portrayed as a deeply personal experience, marked by desire, longing, fulfillment, and loss, rather than as a purely spiritual or idealized bond. Modern Bengali love poetry placed strong emphasis on emotional authenticity and inner conflict. Poets explored the tensions between love and social expectation, individual desire and moral constraint, often presenting love as a fragile yet transformative force. This emphasis on emotional realism allowed Bengali love poetry to address broader social issues, including gender relations, class divisions, and the limitations imposed by tradition. Unlike the overtly rebellious tone found in some modern Arabic love poetry,



modern Bengali love poetry often expressed resistance in subtler ways—through melancholy, introspection, and quiet defiance. Love became a means of questioning social norms without necessarily confronting them directly, reflecting a humanistic vision that valued emotional truth over ideological confrontation.

8. Language and Form: Breaking Classical Conventions

One of the most significant aspects of modernity in both Arabic and Bengali love poetry is the transformation of language and poetic form. Classical poetic structures, characterized by strict meters and formal diction, gradually gave way to freer forms and more flexible language. This formal liberation enabled poets to express emotional nuance and psychological complexity with greater immediacy. In Arabic poetry, the adoption of free verse and prose poetry allowed love poets to move beyond rigid metrical patterns, creating space for spontaneous emotion and fragmented expression. In Bengali poetry, similar experimentation with form facilitated a more intimate and conversational tone. These formal innovations reflect a broader shift toward individual expression and emotional sincerity, aligning poetic practice with modern experiences of love and identity.

9. Comparative Perspective: Shared Trajectories and Distinct Sensibilities

From a comparative perspective, modern Arabic and Bengali love poetry reveal striking parallels despite their cultural differences. Both traditions exhibit a movement away from collective ideals toward individual emotional experience, and both redefine love as a site of personal freedom and self-discovery. However, their sensibilities remain distinct. Modern Arabic love poetry often carries a tone of explicit rebellion and confrontation, reflecting broader struggles against political and social repression. Modern Bengali love poetry, by contrast, tends to emphasize introspection, emotional subtlety, and humanistic reflection. These differences underscore how modernity operates differently across cultural contexts, shaping poetic expression in unique yet comparable ways. Love poetry thus becomes a valuable lens through which to examine the cultural meanings of modernity itself.

10. Tradition and Modernity in Comparative Perspective

A comparative reading of Arabic and Bengali love poetry reveals that the transition from tradition to modernity in both literary cultures follows a broadly similar trajectory, while retaining distinct cultural sensibilities. In both traditions, classical love poetry was deeply embedded in collective values—whether tribal ethics and spiritual symbolism in Arabic poetry, or devotional intimacy and emotional surrender in



Bengali poetry. Love functioned as a moral, cultural, and often metaphysical ideal, shaped by social norms and religious imagination rather than individual autonomy. Modernity, however, transformed love poetry into a space of personal expression and emotional self-definition. In both Arabic and Bengali contexts, modern poets challenged inherited conventions, redefining love as a subjective experience grounded in individual consciousness. This shift reflects broader cultural transformations associated with urbanization, colonial encounters, and the emergence of modern subjectivity. Love poetry thus became a site where poets negotiated the tension between tradition and change, continuity and rupture. Despite these shared developments, the two traditions diverge in tone and emphasis. Modern Arabic love poetry often exhibits a pronounced sense of rebellion, confronting social conservatism and emotional repression directly. Bengali love poetry, while equally modern in sensibility, tends to express resistance more subtly, privileging introspection, melancholy, and humanistic reflection. These differences highlight how cultural context shapes the literary articulation of modernity.

11. Love Poetry as Cultural and Ethical Discourse

Beyond its aesthetic value, love poetry in both Arabic and Bengali traditions functions as a form of cultural and ethical discourse. Classical poets articulated ideals of loyalty, devotion, and restraint, reinforcing social norms while simultaneously exploring emotional depth. Modern poets, by contrast, questioned these norms, using love poetry to critique moral rigidity and social hypocrisy. In Arabic poetry, modern love poems often challenge patriarchal structures and rigid moral codes, presenting love as a form of emotional liberation. In Bengali poetry, love becomes a means of affirming human dignity and emotional authenticity in the face of social constraint. In both cases, love poetry transcends personal emotion to address broader questions of freedom, identity, and ethical responsibility. This ethical dimension underscores the importance of love poetry as a serious literary genre, capable of engaging with fundamental human concerns. Love is not merely a private feeling but a cultural practice shaped by history, power, and social relations.

12. Language, Form, and the Modern Poetic Voice

The transformation of love poetry from tradition to modernity is closely linked to changes in language and poetic form. Classical poetic structures, characterized by strict metrical patterns and elevated diction, gradually gave way to freer forms and more accessible language. This formal shift enabled poets to capture emotional immediacy and psychological complexity more effectively. Modern Arabic and Bengali poets embraced linguistic simplicity and formal experimentation to express intimate emotions



and inner conflict. Free verse, conversational tone, and fragmented structures became tools for articulating modern experiences of love, alienation, and desire. These formal innovations reflect a broader democratization of poetry, bringing literary expression closer to lived reality.

13. The Universal and the Particular in Love Poetry

While Arabic and Bengali love poetry emerge from distinct cultural and historical contexts, their evolution reveals shared human concerns that transcend linguistic and geographical boundaries. Longing, separation, desire, fulfillment, and loss are universal emotional experiences, yet their poetic articulation is shaped by specific cultural frameworks. The comparative study of these traditions demonstrates how literature negotiates the relationship between the universal and the particular, revealing both common humanity and cultural difference. This balance between universality and specificity is what gives love poetry its enduring relevance. By tracing the movement from tradition to modernity, this study highlights how poets continually reinvent love poetry to reflect changing conceptions of selfhood, society, and emotional life.

14. Conclusion

This article has examined Arabic and Bengali love poetry from a comparative perspective, focusing on its transformation from traditional forms to modern expressions. The study has shown that in both literary traditions, love poetry evolved from collective ideals shaped by social and religious values to individualized expressions of emotional freedom and self-awareness. Despite differences in tone, style, and cultural context, both traditions demonstrate how love poetry serves as a mirror of social change and a medium for articulating human emotion. By placing Arabic and Bengali love poetry in dialogue, this research underscores the value of comparative literary studies in illuminating shared human experiences across cultures. Love poetry, far from being a marginal or purely lyrical genre, emerges as a powerful site of cultural meaning, ethical reflection, and artistic innovation. The transition from tradition to modernity in love poetry thus reflects broader transformations in how societies understand love, identity, and emotional expression.

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