

A Contrastive Analysis of Selected Contemporary Arabic and English Panegyrics to Imam Reza (A.S.) from Thematic and Rhetorical Perspectives

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The panegyric (madiḥah) is considered one of the most influential literary genres in religious mourning rituals and devotional praise. Given the significance of religious panegyrics and elegies, extensive research has been conducted on the thematic and rhetorical dimensions of such works in Arabic and Persian literature. However, English poems composed in praise of the Eighth Shi'i Imam (A.S.) have hitherto remained unexamined and unanalyzed. The aim of the present study is a comparative analysis of the themes and figures of speech in contemporary panegyrics to Imam Reza (A.S.) in Arabic and English. This research was conducted using a qualitative approach and a library-based method, with its statistical population comprising Arabic and English poems in praise of Imam Reza (A.S.), selected through purposive sampling from compositions of the last two decades. The findings revealed that the two poetic traditions share common themes such as the Imam's oppression and the tyranny of al-Ma'mūn, the nobility of his lineage, the ardent desire for pilgrimage, and the seeking of intercession (shafa'ah). However, Arabic poetry proves richer and more detailed in representing the Imam's moral and scholarly virtues. Rhetorically, both traditions rely heavily on semantic figures of speech, with the notable difference that English poetry employs modern techniques such as paradox and synaesthesia. Overall, Arabic poetry, drawing upon narrative sources, presents a historical and documented image of the Imam (A.S.), while English poetry, through abstract and universal language, re-presents the same themes for an audience beyond the boundaries of Shi'ism.

Keywords: Panegyrics to Imam Reza (A.S.), Themes, Figures of Speech, Arabic Poetry, English Poetry.



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1. Introduction

Panegyric composition (madīḥah), as one of the most influential literary genres in religious praise and mourning rituals, particularly within the Shi'i tradition, holds an exalted position. This literary genre is considered an effective instrument for upholding the legitimacy of the Ahl al-Bayt (A.S.) and keeping their memory and legacy alive. Despite the numerous studies conducted on the thematic and rhetorical dimensions of religious panegyrics and elegies in Arabic and Persian literature, a significant research gap exists: English poems composed in praise of the Eighth Shi'i Imam, Imam Reza (A.S.), have hitherto remained unexamined and unanalyzed. Furthermore, no comparative study juxtaposing the themes and rhetorical figures of these English poems with their Arabic counterparts has been undertaken. The present study is an endeavor to fill this scholarly gap and seeks to answer the central question of what commonalities and differences exist between the two poetic traditions of Arabic and English in praising Imam Reza (A.S.) from thematic and rhetorical perspectives, and what cultural and literary logic governs these differences.

2. Research Objectives

The primary objective of this research is a comparative analysis of the themes and literary figures employed in contemporary Razavi panegyrics in both Arabic and English. This comparison aims to determine how each of these two poetic traditions has represented the personality, virtues, and oppression of Imam Reza(A.S.), what rhetorical techniques they have utilized to convey religious concepts, and ultimately, what factors (such as target audience, literary tradition, and cognitive resources) have given rise to the observed differences in these two poetic discourses.

3. Methodology

This research was conducted using a qualitative approach and a library-based method. Its statistical population comprises all Arabic and English poems composed in praise of Imam Reza(A.S.). The statistical sample was selected through purposive sampling from compositions of the last two decades. Accordingly, the poems of seven Arab poets (al-Hilālī, al-Jishī, al-Fatlāwī, al-Qaṭīfī, al-Farṭūsī, and al-Iṣfahānī) and three English-language poets (Elias Anderson Jr., Alina Zidi, and Hassan Najafī) were selected for analysis. The theoretical framework of the research rests on two pillars: in the thematic section, the method of “thematic analysis” in six systematic phases (familiarization with data, initial coding, theme formation,

review, final definition and naming, and report compilation) was employed to identify and organize semantic patterns. In the rhetorical section, verbal and semantic figures of speech were identified and comparatively analyzed based on the classical taxonomy of rhetoric.

4. Findings

The comparative analysis of the findings revealed a twofold pattern of convergence and divergence between the two poetic traditions. Thematically, the two traditions share common ground in three areas: first, the consolidation of the sacred identity and prophetic lineage of the Imam (A.S.) through light metaphors; second, the narration of his oppression and the critique of al-Ma'mūn's political agency; and third, the representation of the sensory-emotional experience of the pilgrim, encompassing the ardent desire for pilgrimage and the perception of the fragrance and luminosity of the shrine. However, a fundamental divergence is observed in the representation of the Imam's (A.S.) moral and scholarly virtues. Arabic poetry, drawing upon rich narrative sources (such as 'Uyūn Akhbār al-Reza), provides objective and documented details of the Imam's individual and social conduct, such as his manner of sitting, his recitation of the Quran with weeping, and his concealed care for the needy.

In contrast, English poetry is virtually silent on this matter, expressing the Imam's virtues in an abstract form, such as "the standard of humanity." Another important difference lies in the concept of intercession (shafā'ah): in Arabic poetry, intercession remains confined to an individual and otherworldly framework ("personal supplication for salvation"), whereas English poetry expands it to a "comprehensive moral guarantee for all creatures" (including animals). Rhetorically, both traditions rely on semantic figures of speech (metaphor, simile, allusion), yet notable qualitative differences exist. Arabic poetry limits allusion primarily to the Quran and Hadith, whereas English poetry, through allusions to sacred figures of the Abrahamic religions (such as Joseph and Christ (A.S.)) and more popular narratives (such as the guarantee of the deer), engages in cultural mediation with a global audience. Furthermore, English poetry remarkably employs techniques of modern literature such as paradox (presenting al-Ma'mūn as "dead while alive") and synaesthesia (describing the fragrance of Mashhad as "a light burden and a great keeper"), which are rare in classical Arabic rhetoric.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The research concludes that Arabic and English poetry offer two complementary narratives of the personality of Imam Reza(A.S.). Arabic poetry, drawing upon the narrative treasury and the tradition of the classical ode (qaṣīdah), delineates a historical, documented, and detailed image of the Imam (A.S.) for a Shi'i audience familiar with this tradition. In contrast, English poetry, influenced by modern poetry and aiming to communicate with a global and heterogeneous audience, adopts a more abstract and universal language. These divergences are rooted in three interwoven factors: the “target audience,” “literary tradition,” and the “cognitive resources” of the poets.

The entry of the English language into the tradition of Razavi panegyric composition has brought about a shift in expressive logic and an expansion of the conceptual scope, demonstrating the high capacity of this discourse to adapt to different cultural contexts. Due to its exclusive focus on English panegyrics, this study faces limitations regarding the generalizability of its findings to other Western languages. For future research, replicating this study on panegyrics in other languages and over longer time spans is recommended so that the historical evolution of these themes and the extent of the globalization of Razavi ritual poetry may be better illuminated.

Keywords: Razavi Panegyrics, Contemporary Arabic Poetry, Contemporary English Poetry, Comparative Analysis, Rhetorical Figures, Religious Themes.