
**EXPLORING THE POETRY OF ABŪ AL-‘ALĀ’ AL-MA‘ARRĪ: A JOURNEY
THROUGH HIS POETICAL WORKS**

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Abstract

Among the visually impaired poets, Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī (d.1057 A.D.) proved himself as one of the genius versifiers; and he stands as a pivotal figure in the evolution of Arabic literature during the Abbasid period. This era witnessed a profound transformation in Arab society, shifting from nomadic traditions to a more settled and sophisticated urban lifestyle. Concurrently, the literary landscape underwent significant changes, particularly in the realm of Arabic poetry. The intricate and highly refined meters of traditional Arabian poetry gave way to shorter and more liberated forms. In fact, the poetical genius of al-Ma‘arrī is characterized by a rich tapestry of diverse forms that emanate a prevailing sense of pessimism and scepticism. Despite the prevailing tone of cynicism, al-Ma‘arrī’s poetry transcends the confines of his era, securing him a lasting place as a major figure in Arabic literature. Moreover, his unique perspective and literary contributions have garnered him a special admiration among Western scholars, solidifying his status as a beloved and influential poet whose impact continues to resonate even today.

Keywords: Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī, Abbasid period, Arabic literature, poetry evolution, pessimism, western scholars etc.

Introduction to his Poetry:

The visually impaired poet, Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī (973 – 1057 A.D.), was a renowned poet and philosopher. His journey through the realm of poetical works is considered a brilliant chapter in the domain of Arabic literature. Since he was nurtured in an educated family, he could exhibit his poetic talents in early life, and his thirst for knowledge led him to travel to Baghdad in pursuit of further education. He eventually emerged as one of the most prominent Arab philosophers and poets of his era.

In fact, al-Ma‘arrī is celebrated as one of the eminent luminaries of poetry and stands out as a distinctive figure in Arabic literature. His literary contributions represented a significant departure from the cultural norms prevailing in his time, norms established by the Arab poets and writers who came before him. His poems served as a conduit for expressing his personal experiences, life observations, and profound contemplations on existence. In an era marked by widespread ignorance and the proliferation of superstitions among the people, al-Ma‘arrī’s poetry played a pivotal role in elevating the status of literature, shedding light on the intellectual currents of his age, and challenging the prevailing conventions of his society.¹

The poetic experience of Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī can be divided into two stages; they are as follows:

1. The pre-isolation stage began when al-Ma‘arrī started composing poetry in his youth and ended when he returned from Baghdad; in fact, at that time, he was 37 years old. Al-

Ma'arrî's poetry at this stage was dominated by traditional poetic purposes such as *Madîh* (praise), *Ghazal* (love poetry), and *Rithâ'* (lamentation), and all such poetical features appear clearly in his collection *Saqṭ al-Zand* (The Zand Falls), which is considered an extension of al-Mutanabbî's doctrine. In this connection, al-Ma'arrî was strongly influenced by al-Mutanabbî's poetic style.

2. Post-isolation stage: During this period, Abû al-'Alâ' al-Ma'arrî wrote his collection of poems, *al-Luzûmiyyât*, as his harsh lifestyle, isolation, and asceticism were reflected in his poetry. His poems were also dominated by a philosophical nature, centred on the universe, human life, man's position in it, and his destiny. After that, this collection was completely devoid of the well-known traditional purposes of poetry.²

Going through his poetry collections (*dawâwîn*), we find a number of poetry collections; they are as follows:

1. *Istagfar wa Istagfarî* (Ask for Forgiveness and Seek Forgiveness): This collection of poetry consists of approximately ten thousand verses. It is renowned for its exploration of themes related to forgiveness and redemption, showcasing the poet's deep reflection on these subjects through his lyrical verses.
2. *Al-Ghâz* (Puzzles): This collection of poetry, simply titled "Puzzles," offers readers a poetic journey filled with enigmatic and thought-provoking verses. It invites contemplation and engages the audience's intellectual curiosity.
3. *Jâmi' al-Awzân* (Collection of Measures): is a poetry collection organized based on the meanings and intricacies of riddles. It comprises a remarkable nine thousand lines of verse. Through this collection, the poet delves into the art of wordplay and the challenge of solving poetic riddles.
4. *Saqṭ al-Zand* (Fall of stick of a fire drill): is a collection of poetry created by al-Ma'arrî during the early stages of his literary career. Within these verses, al-Ma'arrî's poetic prowess shines, particularly in his early works. This collection marks the emergence of his talent and provides insights into his poetic development over time.
5. *Luzûm mâ lâ yalzam* (The Necessity of What Is Not Necessary) is a unique collection of poetry meticulously organized by the renowned poet al-Ma'arrî. He arranged the poems according to the letters of the Arabic dictionary with the purpose of showcasing that changing the rhyme letter in a poem doesn't compromise its poetic harmony. In this collection, al-Ma'arrî skilfully includes each letter of the Arabic alphabet, along with its four diacritical marks: *ḍamma*, *fatha*, *kasra*, and *sukûn*. He arranges them in the same sequence, emphasizing his mastery of the phonetic nuances of the Arabic language and the enduring musicality of his verses. This distinctive approach challenges conventional notions of rhyme and rhythm in Arabic poetry, making it a testament to al-Ma'arrî's linguistic and poetic innovation.

These poetry collections offer a diverse range of themes and styles, showcasing the creative depth and artistic evolution of the poet.³

Here mention may be made that Nabil al-Haidarî ⁴ stated that the poet Abû al-Alâ' al-Ma'arrî combined literature, philosophy, heritage, controversy, and science, ultimately acquiring knowledge of astrology that dazzled the luminaries of his era. They acknowledged his genius, distinction, and creativity. He was the sole recipient of the title "the wonder of his time" following his examination in Baghdad. It is unsurprising that prominent figures wrote about him during the passage of subsequent times, even Orientalists found themselves confounded by his genius, intellect, and philosophy. For instance, *al-Luzûmiyyât* was translated into English, French, German, Spanish, Russian, and other languages.

Al-Haidarî added that due to his beliefs, Abû al-Alâ' al-Ma'arrî was compelled to depart from Aleppo, but his presence there, as Al-Haidari believes, sparked numerous literary, sectarian, philosophical, and intellectual events and disputes in a city that was already charged with diverse schools of thought, literary tendencies, religious beliefs, and intellectual currents. At that time, Baghdad, as Taha Hussain noted, resembled "today's Paris." Throughout the Islamic world, one would hardly find a young man who had completed his studies in his homeland without yearning to journey to Baghdad and partake in its wealth of knowledge, which constituted one of the purest and most enticing sources. Abû al-Alâ' al-Ma'arrî attended various gatherings in Baghdad, engaging in conversations with writers, philosophers, and representatives of different sects and schools of thought. He did not content himself with reading about them but instead visited them to engage in direct, fearless dialogues and scientific debates. Among the most significant works he produced during that period were *Al-Luzûmiyat*, *Saqṭ al-Zand*, and *Risâlah al-Ghufrân* (The Epistle of Forgiveness). Nevertheless, his disagreements with the jurists in Baghdad compelled him to return to Ma'arra al-Numan and spend his life there, isolated within his home, a "prisoner of two worlds." Nonetheless, as al-Haidarî noted, his affection for Baghdad endured, and he regretted his departure, yearning to draw his last breath there. It should be noted that Abû al-Alâ' al-Ma'arrî's poetry served as a quintessential example of Arabic poetry, characterized by its eloquence, wisdom, and elegance, with his poems encompassing a wide range of themes, from poetic praise and wisdom to expressions of pride and lamentation. ⁵

Description:

(A) Biography of Abû al-'Alâ al-Ma'arrî:

Abû al-'Alâ' Ahmad ibn 'Abd Allah al-Ma'arrî was born in the year 973 A.D. in Ma'arra, a small town situated in the southern Aleppo region. His life took a challenging turn at the tender age of four when he contracted a severe case of smallpox, rendering him completely blind—a condition he bore until his last breath. Sadly, he also lost his father during his formative years, and it was not until he reached the age of fourteen that he mentally prepared himself for serious studies.

Driven by his thirst for knowledge, he embarked on a journey that led him to various places, including Aleppo, Antioch, and several other Syrian towns. He demonstrated extraordinary dedication by committing numerous manuscripts, housed within the libraries of institutions of that era, to memory. Additionally, his keen intuition led him to attend lectures delivered by renowned scholars of his time. His remarkable aptitude for learning undoubtedly showcased his exceptional

intellect and prodigious memory. Upon completing his extensive studies, he returned to his hometown of Ma'arra in the year 993 A.D.⁶

Abū al-'Alā' Ahmad, originally known as Ahmad, the son of 'Abd Allah, the son of Sulaiman al-Tanukhī, hailed from the Tanukh tribe of Yemen. His father, 'Abd Allah, held a distinguished position in al-Ma'arra, serving as the Qādī (Judge). Sadly, Abū al-'Alā' lost vision in his left eye, and his right eye turned white, leading him to face numerous challenges. He could perceive only one colour, which was red, yet his elders dressed him in yellow garments.

At the age when he was ready to embark on his educational journey, he studied the Arabic language and literature under various teachers of his time. Eventually, he reached a point where he found no equals among scholars capable of teaching him further, prompting his return to his hometown.

When he turned twenty, he began teaching Arabic language and literature, delving deep into the intricacies of language and its nuances. He attained such mastery that no one could match his expertise. In the year 1002 A.D, he left al-Ma'arra for Syria, visiting the library of Tripoli and residing in Latakia, West Syria, near a monastery, where he immersed himself in the study of both ancient and contemporary periods for two years. Subsequently, he travelled extensively through Syrian cities.

Ultimately, his desire led him to Baghdad, renowned as a hub of learning and scholars, where he aimed to study Greek and Indian philosophy. His reputation had already reached the scholars there, and they eagerly sought his guidance in education and literature. He ardently pursued the study of philosophy, consistently working toward his ambitious goals. Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī found a fertile intellectual ground in Baghdad, where his ideas resonated widely. He regularly met with a group of philosophers at the residence of Abū Ahmad 'Abd al-Salām ibn al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī every Friday, drawing wisdom and literary inspiration from their discussions.⁷

It is essential to note that 'Abd al-Salām held the esteemed position of overseeing one of the city's magnificent libraries. As mentioned earlier, every Friday, a gathering of free-thinkers convened at his residence, and Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī swiftly became a member of this circle. Among its participants were individuals with diverse philosophical leanings – some were rationalists, akin to the Mu'tazilites, while others were outright materialists. Undoubtedly, their society left an indelible mark on the poet's perspectives.

After spending one year and seven months in Baghdad, Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī received a summons back to Ma'arra due to his mother's illness. Regrettably, upon his return, he discovered that his mother had already passed away. In response to this heart-wrenching loss, he penned verses filled with profound emotion and chose not to depart from his hometown ever again.⁸

Starting from that juncture, he distanced himself from social engagements, except for his interactions with his pupils. He imposed upon himself a solitary existence, embracing seclusion, visual obscurity, and the confines of his dwelling. His unwavering commitment revolved around imparting wisdom and documenting the elusive essence of existence—something beyond the grasp of fauna and beyond creation. His nourishment was simple, deriving satisfaction from legumes,

figs, and an annual allowance of thirty dinars. His clothing and bedding were unpretentious, featuring rough-hewn cotton and a chilly mattress.

He made the choice to forego matrimony, preferring to spare his progeny from societal scrutiny and the trials of life. He maintained his bachelorhood until his final breath in the year 1057 AD. He graced this terrestrial realm for eighty-four years. His last desire was for the following verse to adorn his sepulchre:

“The one responsible for my suffering was my father, yet I refrained from wrongdoing towards anyone else”.

It has come to light that following his passing and the final rites of his burial, approximately eighty individuals of great renown and standing, along with a hundred erudite scholars well-versed in jurisprudence, experts in the traditions of the Prophet (peace be upon him), and revered Sufi saints, gathered in close proximity to his resting place.⁹

(B) His endeavour in versification:

Abû al-‘Alâ’ al-Ma‘arrî’s versification endeavours hold great significance in the realm of Arabic literature. It is noteworthy that during his contemporary period, public life was far from comfortable for the soul and did not satisfy the wisdom of a wise man. This was primarily due to political and moral corruption, wealth disparities, and religious divisions influencing society. Conversely, the private life of Abû al-‘Alâ’ was not notably better than public life, marked by misfortunes, family revelations, and a well-travelled existence that exposed him to various cities and environments.

Abû al-‘Alâ’ al-Ma‘arrî possessed a sharp intellect, profound insight, and refined taste, all of which played pivotal roles in shaping his literary legacy. Here, we shall analyze this legacy, dissecting it into its constituent elements, while maintaining brevity and efficiency.

Indeed, Abû al-‘Alâ’ al-Ma‘arrî was not only a genius poet but also a prose writer. He undeniably crafted a substantial volume of poetry, although much of it has been lost to the sands of time, leaving only remnants for posterity. His poetic journey commenced at the tender age of eleven when he embarked on the qarid industry, a pursuit he continued for over eighty years of his life. With such a lengthy and prolific career, it is reasonable to assume that he produced a considerable body of poetry, even though many of his works grappled with themes now obscured by history.

For instance, he made reference to a book titled *Istagfar wa Istagfari* (Ask for Forgiveness and Seek Forgiveness), supposedly containing ten thousand verses, but today, all we possess is its name. Nasirî Khusraw’s travelogue reported that in the year 1046 AD, Abû al-‘Alâ’ al-Ma‘arrî composed eleven hundred verses of poetry, just a decade prior to his passing. It is highly probable that he continued to produce more poetry thereafter, yet today, we possess only a fraction of what historical records suggest he created.

In fact, Abû al-‘Alâ’ al-Ma‘arrî was a genius poet and a prose writer as well. He undoubtedly composed a substantial volume of poetry, though more of it is lost to time than what remains. His journey in the world of poetry began at the age of eleven when he engaged in the qarid industry, and he continued this pursuit until he reached over eighty years of age. Given such

a lengthy and prolific life, it is reasonable to assume he produced a considerable body of poetry, although much of it deals with themes now lost to history. For instance, he mentioned a book titled *Istagfar wa Istagfarî* (Ask for Forgiveness and Seek Forgiveness), which supposedly contained ten thousand verses, yet all we know is its name. Nasiri Khusraw's travelogue reports that in the year 1046 AD, Abû al-'Alâ' al-Ma'arrî composed eleven hundred verses of poetry, a decade before his death. It is highly likely that he produced more poetry after this, though today we possess only a fraction of what historical records suggest he created.¹⁰

(C) His Collections of Arabic Poetry:

In the realm of Arabic Poetry literature, we find just three collections of Abû al-'Alâ' al-Ma'arrî. The first, *Saqṭ al-Zand* (The Fall of the Fire Stick), is believed to contain his youthful poetry. Interestingly, it includes poems composed both in Baghdad and after his return to Ma'arra. It is a notable factor that one poem, "Al-Ta'iyya," sent to the treasurer of Dâr al-'Ilm in Baghdad, is thought to date back to the year 1023 AD. At that time, Abû al-'Alâ' al-Ma'arrî was fifty years old, this contradicts the idea that these are solely youthful compositions. Abû al-'Alâ' al-Ma'arrî himself indicated that *Saqṭ al-Zand* included poems from his youth, but he only revealed this in records of his books, likely written after 1048 AD. It is possible that this collection was compiled post his return from Baghdad, with new poetry added to it.

The second collection, *al-Dir'iyât*, is a small collection of poems primarily describing shields. It was printed in Egypt and appended to *Saqṭ al-Zand*. Although listed as an independent book in the catalogue, we cannot definitively determine why Abû al-'Alâ' had such a fascination with armour descriptions. Perhaps it was a display of his mastery of the art, as he had likely memorized numerous armour descriptions. Alternatively, there may be a deeper connection between shields and the strict code he adopted, which he adhered to even amid suffering and anxiety. However, a historical context is needed to assert that shields only became a prominent subject in his life during the third phase, unless evidence proves otherwise.

The third collection, *al-Luzûmiyât*, is the largest and most significant. All of its contents were composed during the third phase of Abû al-'Alâ' al-Ma'arrî's life, offering profound insights into his mind, conscience, and character. In subsequent sections, we will explore each of these collections individually before providing a general overview of Abû al-'Alâ' al-Ma'arrî's place in poetry and his significance.¹¹

Discussion on his Poetical Works:

(1) The Saqṭ al-Zand:

This book is a collection that includes, among other things, praise-filled poems, some of which were previously mentioned. Within this *dîwân*, the poet often adheres to the traditional three-part structure of the classical *qasîda*, consisting of *nasîb*, *rahîl*, and *madih*. However, at times, he chooses to deviate from this structure, even entirely omitting the *nasîb*. It's important to note that this divergence doesn't align with the path taken by the poet Abû Nuwâs, who, in rejecting the *nasîb*, embraces the depiction of wine.

In the case of the ascetic Abû al-'Alâ' al-Ma'arrî, the consumption and portrayal of wine are disapproved of, with preference given to water.

When the poet does include the *nasīb*, he often emphasizes its elegiac nature by describing cooing turtle doves. The mournful cooing of these doves, reminiscent of lost offspring from the distant past, is frequently likened to the poet's yearning for an unattainable and far-off beloved. The poet reflects on how the sound of cooing stirs profound thoughts within him. In certain *nasīb*s, the poet, being blind, seeks his fellow travellers to trace a distant flash of lightning in the land of his beloved. When he sleeps, he can perceive the deceptive apparition of his beloved visiting him.

The *rahīl* in his *qasīdas* is usually quite detailed, featuring descriptions such as weary camels exhausted from long journeys and the mirage. The desert's fauna, including antelopes, sand-grouse, ostriches, and chameleons, is also mentioned. His predilection for describing the night is conspicuous, and some commentaries suggest a connection to the poet's blindness. Further thoughts on the *rahīl* and the evolution of his journey descriptions are explored.

Regarding the independent form of the *ghazal*, Abū al-‘Alā’ shows little interest, and when he does engage with it, it appears to be more of a technical exercise within a specific genre. The *madīh*, the final part of the *qasīda*, often features extravagant praise of the subject, a practice that the poet later regretted, as he mentioned in the preface to his *dīwān*. He believed that such hyperbolic descriptions, although initially related to a human being, should ultimately be reserved for the exalted attributes of God alone.

In the poetical anthology entitled *Saqṭ al-Zand*, Abū al-‘Alā’ compiled examples of what might also be considered another form of the *qasīda*: the elegy composed in honour of a deceased person, as mentioned earlier. In certain succinct lines within Abū al-‘Alā’'s elegies (*rithā’*), we can discern the origins of the pessimistic tone that later became prevalent in the *Luzūm*. The poetry in *Saqṭ al-zand* is marked by its lavish ornamentation, showcasing numerous special figures of speech. In addition to frequent forms of wordplay, there is also the use of "double entendre" (*tawriya*).

It is noteworthy that a subset of 31 poems in *Saqṭ al-Zand* is grouped under the title *Dir‘iyyât*, or "Armour poems." These poems stand out for their descriptions of one or more suits of armour, with traditional *qasīda* themes like *rahīl* and *madīh* often omitted, and the *nasīb* taking a subordinate role in a few instances.

Moreover, beyond their content, these poems are intriguing for their format. A significant portion of them is structured as dialogues attributed to characters associated with a suit of armour.

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(2) *Luzûm mâ lâ yalzam*:

The *Luzûm mâ lâ yalzam*, a second collection of poetry, was composed after the poet's stay in Baghdad. This collection, unlike *Saqṭ al-Zand*, did not gain as much popularity in the Muslim world due to its unconventional form and content. The title, "Committing one's self to what is not obligatory" or "The self-imposed compulsion," pertains to a unique aspect of rhyme. In the *Luzûm*, Abū al-‘Alā’ employed a more challenging form using double-rhyme instead of the usual mono-rhyme, thus introducing an innovation in the established rules of rhyme. His rhyming method came to be known as *iltizâm* in later Arabic theoretical works.

The poet himself described the content of the *Luzûm* in his Preface as a glorification of God, a reminder for the forgetful, an awakening for the negligent, and a caution against the world's mockery of God. He expressed his reluctance to adhere to the conventional themes, remarking that "poets aim at embellishing their words by means of lies." By this, he meant the descriptions of beloved ones in *ghazal* and *nasīb*, the exaggerations about horses and camels in *rahīl*, and the glorification of wine, as seen in the *khamriyya*. Abû al-'Alâ' pointed out the false pretences of poets who, despite leading comfortable lives, pretended to endure arduous desert expeditions. In contrast, he claimed that his poetry sought truth and piety, making it incompatible with the accepted conventions of "normal" poetry. Hence, he concluded that his poetry in *Luzûm* was weak.

From Abû al-'Alâ's words, it can be inferred that he primarily intended his work in *Luzûm* as a collection of poetry, even if it was considered "weak." He did not explicitly present it as a systematic arrangement of philosophical ideas. Nevertheless, scattered throughout the *Luzûm* are opinions that do not always align with orthodox Islamic beliefs. While he was a monotheist, his belief in God's word as revealed through prophecy appeared uncertain. He expressed doubts about resurrection and retribution while emphasizing the importance of reason as a reliable guide in human life. Some Arabic historians questioned his orthodoxy, as evidenced by a dream in which he was tormented by two vipers with the interpretation, "This is al-Ma'arrî, the heretic."

Conversely, some Arabic biographers and historians endeavoured to defend Abû al-'Alâ' against charges of unorthodoxy. Ibn al-'Adîm, in his monograph on Abû al-'Alâ', titled "Fair treatment and selection of the best in defending Abû al-'Alâ' against unjustified attacks," conducted meticulous research on Abû al-'Alâ' two centuries after the poet's death. He consulted descendants of those in Ma'arra who had interacted with him and utilized local historical sources, providing *isnâds* and titles where appropriate.

It is worth noting that in the West, the *Luzûmiyyât* became a more widely recognized work. During the latter part of life of Abû al-'Alâ', the Fatimids extended their authority over northern Syria, leading to some discontentment, as hinted at in certain lines within the *Luzûmiyyât*. The renowned scholar Ṭaha Ḥusayn conducted research on Dhikrâ Abû al-'Alâ' and presented an intriguing analysis of the poet's philosophical ideas as reflected in the *Luzûm*. Additionally, many quotations from the *Luzûm* have been incorporated into a psychologically oriented biography of Abû al-'Alâ' al-Ma'arrî, authored by 'Ā'isha 'Abd al-Rahmân, known as Bint al-Shâtî'.¹³

(3) *Malqâ al-Sabîl* (Tales from the Road):

This concise work has etched itself firmly in the annals of Abû al-'Alâ' al-Ma'arrî's literary legacy, destined for perpetual recognition alongside his poetry. It is said to have found a warm reception in the realms of the Muslim West, often inspiring attempts at emulation (*mu'ârada*). Notably, titles and brief excerpts from such emulations are chronicled in Ḥasan Ḥusnî 'Abd al-Wahhâb's work, *Mu'âradaât al-Maghâriba li-Mulqâ al-Sabîl*, a valuable resource found in *Ta'rîf*.

The composition known as *Malqâ al-Sabîl* unfolds as a series of succinct paragraphs, seamlessly blending rhymed prose with poetic lines. An intriguing feature is the deliberate alignment of each paragraph of rhymed prose with its succeeding poetic counterpart, maintaining

thematic continuity. These contents remain deeply rooted in orthodox values and exhibit no discernible departure from established moral and literary traditions.

Remarkably, some scholars have noted a semblance to the eloquent oratory of pre-Islamic figures such as Quss ibn Şâ'ida within this work. Furthermore, 'Abd al-Wahhâb conjectures that *Malqâ al-Sabîl* may be a product of the poet's later years, signifying a return to his foundational religious principles.¹⁴

His Type of Poetry:

Abu'l-'Alâ' al-Ma'arrî led a life similar to that of an ordinary person but gained a wealth of experience through various challenging situations. Despite facing adversity, he acquired valuable lessons that made him shine in the Arab world's intellectual landscape. He travelled to different cities and experienced diverse environments, which greatly influenced his literary works in both prose and poetry.

Al-Ma'arrî considered himself a poet, and his poems have left an indelible mark on Arabic literature. Remarkably, he lost his eyesight at the young age of four, but this did not deter his prolific output. He began composing poetry at the tender age of eleven and continued to do so for over eighty years, demonstrating his unwavering dedication to the craft.

During his long and productive life, he penned numerous poems, with one of his notable works being a book called *Istagfir wa Istagfirî*, which contained ten thousand couplets. Unfortunately, this book is currently unavailable, and its existence is known only by its name.

In a fascinating detail, Nasirî Khasru, in his travel account, reported that Abû al-'Alâ' al-Ma'arrî composed a staggering one hundred thousand couplets, and this estimation was made a decade before his passing. His dedication to poetry remained steadfast until the end of his life, making him a prolific and influential figure in the world of Arabic literature.¹⁵

Abu'l-'Alâ' al-Ma'arrî possessed a remarkable memory and could easily commit to memory anything he learned or encountered. He had a sharp wit and a great sense of humour, and his poetry was known for its unique qualities.

People often described his poetry as a blend of concealment and clarity, similar to Sufi teachings. He explored various themes in his poetry, including wine, humour, hunting, and satire. These themes were typically expressed through selective odes that touched on topics like elegy, eulogy, and pride.

In his early poetry, al-Ma'arrî often used exaggeration and unconventional language, sometimes neglecting grammatical rules. He engaged in poetic competitions, which added a layer of literary beauty to his work. He also incorporated unusual words and scientific terminology into his poems.

As he matured, his poetry became less exaggerated and more restrained. He departed from the style of his Arab predecessors and was influenced by the Bedouin tradition, using pure language and employing challenging meters. This unique approach set him apart and elevated the beauty and musicality of his poetry, allowing him to convey his philosophical ideas effectively.

Al-Ma‘arrî earned a prominent place in the world of Arabic poetry and philosophy, often considered second only to the famous poet al-Mutanabbî. His distinctive style and profound views were recognized and celebrated by his contemporaries.¹⁶

Abu'l-‘Alâ’ al-Ma‘arrî’s poetic works are preserved in three collections within the realm of Arabic literature. The first one, *Siqṭ al-Zand*, is renowned for containing his poems from different periods of his life while he was in Baghdad. The compilation of these poems took place after he returned to his hometown, al-Ma‘arra, and likely included additional excellent poems.

The second collection, *al-Dir‘iyyât*, is a smaller *dîwân* of poetry that primarily focuses on describing plate armour. This collection was published in Egypt along with the book *Siqṭ al-Zand*. All the poems in *al-Dir‘iyyât* centre around themes of weaponry and war and were composed during the third phase of his life.

The third and most extensive collection is known as *al-Luzûmiyyât*. It is the largest among the three *dîwâns* and features poems composed during the same third phase of his life. Notably, the poems in *al-Luzûmiyyât* provide insights into his intellect, emotions, and behaviour, offering a comprehensive view of his life and thoughts.¹⁷

Characteristics of Abû al-‘Alâ’ Al-Ma‘arrî’s poetry:

Abû al-‘Alâ’ Al-Ma‘arrî’s poetry is distinguished by several key characteristics, revolving around language, style, and musicality, which collectively contribute to the uniqueness of his poetic expression. These characteristics are as follows:

1. **Mastery of Language:** Abû al-‘Alâ’ Al-Ma‘arrî possessed an exceptional command of the Arabic language. His ability to manipulate it, create special structures, and utilize a distinct linguistic style set him apart as a poet of great linguistic prowess.
2. **Broad Linguistic Culture:** He demonstrated a profound understanding of the Arabic language's nuances, showcasing skill, brilliance, and a genius for adapting its elements to convey his thoughts and emotions effectively.
3. **Use of Uncommon Words:** Abû al-‘Alâ’ Al-Ma‘arrî often incorporated unusual and rare words into his poetry and prose. For instance, he wrote lines such as, "And death is a comfort for a person, his heart has been damaged by a disease of exhaustion," and "He spread his souls before Noah and Adam to this day, they have not been called to the graves."
4. **Varied Style:** His style exhibited versatility, ranging from simplicity, clarity, and ease to complexity. His compositions displayed strength and were known for their distinctive yet straightforward style.
5. **Stylistic Strength:** Abû al-‘Alâ’ Al-Ma‘arrî’s poetry was characterized by its powerful and resonant style. He conveyed his ideas effectively, as seen in verses like, "Those of virtue, in their homelands, are strangers, alienated and distanced by their relatives."
6. **Elegance in Composition:** His compositions were marked by elegance and precision. He employed various stylistic techniques, including interrogative, prohibitive, and negative methods, to convey his ideas. For instance, he wrote, "Natures of hypocrisy contain hypocrisy, so keep them alone and do not accompany a friend with whom you are hypocritical."

7. Attention to Rhyme: Al-Ma'arrî paid meticulous attention to rhyme schemes, using elaborate methods to enhance the musicality and beauty of his poetry.
8. Acute Musical Sense: He possessed a keen sense of auditory aesthetics, often employing a phenomenon known as musical fragmentation in his verses. An example of this can be found in the line, "There will come upon creation morning and evening, and all of us will be women for the seasons of eternity."

In fact, Abû al-'Alâ' Al-Ma'arrî's poetry is characterized by his profound linguistic knowledge, skilful manipulation of language, use of rare words, versatile style, stylistic strength, compositional elegance, careful attention to rhyme, and a refined sense of auditory aesthetics. These qualities collectively make his poetry distinctive and noteworthy in the world of Arabic literature.¹⁸

Language in the poetry of Abû al-'Alâ' al-Ma'arrî:

Abû al-'Alâ' al-Ma'arrî enriched his literary production with the huge vocabulary of the language that he derived from the Arabic dictionary, and he used this vocabulary in ways that served his various literary arts, whether prose or poetry. He was helped in this by his strong memory, his passion for reading, and his extensive knowledge, in addition to his study of the linguistic sciences of grammar and morphology. and offers; His culture was broad and comprehensive of all forms of the language and the strange ones, and this linguistic culture appeared clearly in his poetry. Al-Ma'arrî was deeply interested in the language, skilled in dealing with its vocabulary, and searching for its meanings and secrets. Al-Ma'arrî also understood the rhetorical methods and their secrets, and this interest was clearly demonstrated in his collection (The Fall of the Zand), which was distinguished by the abundance of meanings, the elegance of the vocabulary, the strength of the structures, the skill in the systems, and the goodness of the language. Choosing words and meanings. The Bedouin character dominated Al-Ma'arrî's vocabulary and style, of which testimony finds in the transcription of Arabic verse as follows:

jâ'a al-rabî' waṭṭbâka al-mar'â

*wastannatil-fiṣâl hattâ al-qar'a*¹⁹

(Spring has come and the pasture is fresh

And the classrooms were extended to the villages)

Despite his urban upbringing, Abû al-'Alâ' al-Ma'arrî frequently incorporated Bedouin words into his poetry. He was also deeply influenced by pre-Islamic and ancient poets, often composing his verses in their distinctive style, thereby emulating their ability to evoke rich meanings and vivid poetic images. His poetry frequently featured references to and descriptions of camels, mounts, as well as the symbolic elements of the sword and shield, all of which served as eloquent analogies for the themes of life and death.

For instance, he eloquently expressed this theme in the following transcribed verse:

ṭâra al-nawâ'ib yauma fâd nawâ'ian

*fanadabnahu li-muwâfiq wa manâf*²⁰

(The misfortune flew on the day of Fad specifically,
So we describe it as agreeable and discordant.)

This blending of urban and Bedouin influences, along with his homage to ancient poetic traditions, contributed to the depth and complexity of Abu Al-Ala Al-Ma'arrî's poetic repertoire.

*yu 'âdhil in şumma al-qanâ 'an na 'yhi
fawâ hasadâ min ba 'dihi lil-qanâ al-şumma
bakâ al-saif hatta akhdala al-dam ' jufunuhu
'alâ fâris yurwîhi min fâris al-duhm.*²¹

(I apologize if al-Qana is deaf to his obituary
They were envious of the deaf people after him
The sword cried until tears soaked his eyelids
Persian should quince their thirst by Persian's catastrophe.)

The words night, darkness, day, and light also appeared frequently in Al-Ma'arrî's poetry as a result of his intense early feeling of blackness as a result of his blindness. In this connection, we find the following verses; which are transcribed as follows:

*falayta al-layâlî sâmahatnî bi-nâzir
yarâka wa man lî fi-al-Duḥâ fi al-aşâ 'il
fa-law Annâ aynayya matta 'at-hâ bi-nazrah
ilayka al-amânî mâ halumtu bi-ghâ 'il.*²²

(I wish the nights would forgive me with a glance
He sees you and who is mine in the forenoon in the evenings
If only my eyes could enjoy a look
Here are my wishes; I never dreamed of deceit.)

Scholars' Views on the Poetry of Abu'l-'Alâ' al-Ma'arrî:

According to Professor R.A. Nicholson, Abû'l-'Alâ' al-Ma'arrî's poems in the style of odes, primarily found in *Siqt al-Zand*, were mostly written before he reached the age of thirty-five. These poems reflect the influence of his admiration for the poet Mutanabbî and include some impressive panegyrics (praise poems) and elegies.

It is interesting to note that *Siqt al-Zand* has been more popular in the East than al-Ma'arrî's other work, known as *al-Luzumiyyât*. This popularity difference is because *al-Luzûmiyyât* contains opinions that many Muslim people disagree with. Its form and content don't align with their expectations of what poetry should be.

In the context of Arabic poetry, the typical form is the ode. Al-Ma'arrî himself acknowledged this, emphasizing the importance of the ode in Arabic poetry, which about the poet Al-Ma'arrî hinted as follows:

"I have not tried to make my poetry more attractive by adding made-up stories or including romantic tales, battles, or descriptions of parties with wine and such. My goal is to convey the truth. It's important to note that poetry's primary purpose isn't truth; it's actually about

*imagination and fiction. When poetry strays from its intended purpose, it loses its perfection. So, I ask my readers to understand that this book contains moral poetry, not the typical imaginative content found in poetry.”*²³

From the perspective of the poet Abû al-‘Alâ’ al-Ma‘arrî, when he speaks of truth in his poetry, he's referring to moral and philosophical truth. He doesn't mean that the best poetry is disconnected from real life but rather that it can seem false because it reflects the imperfect and false aspects of human life and nature, which are often filled with illusions and deceptions. Essentially, he's saying that the fault lies in the subject matter he's addressing, not in the poet's portrayal of it.²⁴

It appears from the contents of poetry of Abû al-‘Alâ’ Al-Ma‘arrî that he is often characterized as a sceptical thinker who questioned his own beliefs and criticized superstitions within religions. His worldview is often described as pessimistic, and he is often associated with deism. Al-Ma‘arrî held the belief that religion was essentially a superstition invented by ancient civilizations, devoid of real value except for those who used it to manipulate the credulous masses. During his lifetime, various rulers in Egypt, Baghdad, and Aleppo exploited religion as a means to legitimize and consolidate their power. Al-Ma‘arrî openly rejected certain tenets of Islam and other religions.

Some researchers argue that Al-Ma‘arrî was critical of several Islamic doctrines, including the Hajj, which he referred to as a "pagan's journey." It is also documented that Al-Ma'arri expressed his belief that the ritual of kissing the Black Stone in Mecca was a religious myth.

Some Orientalists argue that Al-Ma‘arrî rejected the idea of "divine revelation." His philosophy leaned towards that of a philosopher and ascetic, prioritizing reason as his moral guide and virtue as his ultimate reward. His pessimistic outlook led him to the extreme stance of recommending against having children to spare them the suffering of life. In an elegy he wrote after losing a relative, he combined his grief with contemplations on the fleeting nature of existence, expressing as follows:

"Reduce human connections. I believe the Earth's surface bears nothing but these mortal bodies."

²⁵

Researchers have different perspectives on Abû Al-‘Alâ’ Al-Ma‘arrî's beliefs. Some suggest that he shares core beliefs with many Muslims, affirming the attributes of perfection for God and rejecting attributes of imperfection.

Aisha ‘Abd al-Rahman, daughter of Al-Shâti’, mentions that although there were criticisms and misunderstandings about some of his statements, much of his work revolved around asceticism, sermons, and praising God. Those close to him attested to his unwavering faith and sincere belief.

Dr. Taha Hussein notes that Al-Ma‘arrî believed in a wise Creator of the world, expressing this belief with sincerity. However, he struggled to comprehend the wisdom behind the Creator's actions, causing inner turmoil.

In his own words, Al-Ma‘arrî believed in an unseen and ever-present God, emphasizing the importance of faith in one Lord and avoiding wrongdoing. He also stressed sincere worship of

God and disavowed those who did not worship Him sincerely. In fact, Abû Al-‘Alâ’ Al-Ma‘arrî believed in God as the Creator, but his quest to understand the Creator's wisdom led to a complex and introspective worldview.

Shawqî Daif points out that Al-Ma‘arrî's criticisms were not aimed at religions themselves but at their followers. There's a distinction between critiquing Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, and critiquing Muslims, Christians, and Jews. The focus of Abû Al-‘Alâ’ Al-Ma‘arrî was on highlighting the intellectual deficiencies he perceived in the people of his time who adhered to various religious beliefs.

During his era, different sects and groups within these religions had significant variations in their beliefs. For instance, the Ismaili-Fatimi doctrine controlled Egypt and the Levant but had divergent interpretations. Abû Al-‘Alâ’ Al-Ma‘arrî critiqued not only them but also Shiite sects, Nusayris who believed in reincarnation, and Sufis who had their unique beliefs.

When he asserted that those following such doctrines lacked intellect, it wasn't an attack on the religions themselves but rather a criticism of the adherents of these religions during his time, including Muslims, Christians, and Jews.²⁶

Conclusion:

Abû al-‘Alâ’ al-Ma‘arrî emerges as a multifaceted figure in the realm of poetry, philosophy, and ethics. His three anthologies, namely *Siqṭ al-Zand*, *al-Dir‘iyyât*, and *al-Luzûmiyyât*, each offer a unique perspective on his literary style and philosophical outlook. Indeed, Al-Ma‘arrî is recognized as an original thinker and poet who approached life with an open and independent mind, often aligning his conclusions with modern thought. His philosophical and ethical musings serve as a backdrop to his poetry, which is marked by artistic skill, depth, and creativity. In fact, his *Luzûmiyyât* stands as a testament to his mastery of the Arabic language, evident in his wordplay, vivid imagery, and distinct style. His poems possess a unique blend of melancholic tones, sharp wit, satire, and epigram. His poetical anthology *Siqṭ al-Zand* contains verses covering panegyric, glorification, love preludes, and elegies. While this collection lacks a distinct historical or thematic system, it provides valuable insights into al-Ma‘arrî's versatility as a poet, capturing the essence of various human experiences and emotions. Overall, Abû al-‘Alâ’ al-Ma‘arrî's contributions to Arabic literature and philosophy continue to be celebrated for their depth, originality, and enduring relevance.

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