

AL- SHANFARA'S *LAMIYYATU'L ARAB* AND THE HORRORS OF DESERT TRAVELING

Wisam Mansour

Abstract

Al-Shanfara's "Lamiyyatu'l Arab", the 68-line, 6th century Arabic poem, is far from looking at the desert with a romantic eye. It, in fact, draws a grim image of traveling solo in the Arabian deserts. In its treatment and presentation of its subject, the poem departs totally from the conventional travel literature written by medieval and later travelogues. While conventional travelers travel to explore, seek knowledge, fortune, and fame or serve a cause and then return home, al-Shanfara's motive is malicious and narcissistic. The paper will show that al-Shanfara entered the desert with arrogance and exited it with the same mindset, not knowing that his interaction with the desert has mediated his sulfuric personality and transformed him from a predator to a deer.

Key words: desert, travel, Brigand Poets, Al-Shanfara, Arabic Poetry, Lamiyya.

Özet

El Sanfara'nun "Arap Lamiyyesi" Şiiri ve Çölde Seyahat Etmenin Korkunçluğu

6.yüzyıl şairi El Şanfara'nın 68 satırlık "Arap Lamiyyesi" şiirinin çöllerinde yaklaşımı romantik olmaktan uzaktır. Eser, Arap çöllerinde yalnız başına seyahatin karanlık bir resmini çizer. Konunun işlenişi ve sunumu açısından bu şiir, ortacağ ve sonrası seyahatname yazarlarının alışıl gelmiş seyahat edebiyatından tamamen farklıdır. Geleneksel olarak seyyahlar keşfetme, bilgi veya tin kazanma, bazen de bir gayeye hizmet etme ve sonunda eve dönme amacıyla yolculuğa çıkarlar. El Şanfara ise kötü niyetli ve bencildir. Bu makalenin amacı, El Şanfara'nın (çöle kibirle girdiğini ve aynı kafayapısıyla çıktığını, bu arada çölle etkileşimi dolayısıyla katı

kişiliğinin yumuşayıp, yırtıcı bir hayvandan bir geyiğe dönüştüğünü ayımsamadığını göstermektedir.

Anahtar sözcükler: çöl, seyahat, Aykırı Şairler, El Şanfara, Arap Şiiri, Arap Lamiyyesi.

Al-Shanfara's¹ *Lamiyyatu'l Arab*² the 68-line, 6th century Arabic poem, can be seen as a text about the horrors of desert traveling, even for those who have been bred on its edges. The poem draws a grim image of traveling solo in the Arabian Deserts. Naturally, in its treatment and presentation of its subject, it departs totally from the conventional travel literature written by medieval and later travelogues. The poem provides, through what befell its persona - who happens to be the poet himself³ - straight and realistic answers to such questions posed by some Western desert lovers such as Bancroft, whose romantic fascination from a distance with the vast, relatively "unpeopled tracts of sunstruck sand and rock" has fired his imagination to

¹ Little is known about al-Shanfara of Azd beyond what his surviving poems tell. It is, however, certain that the poet belonged to a stock of the Yemenite tribe called al-Azd, and probably to the clan of it called al-Hijr. His father's name is not mentioned, although according to a verse attributed to him in al-Aghani by al-Isbahani, he claimed to be of noble parentage on the side of both father and mother. This seems unlikely; probably he had African blood in his veins, since one of the interpretations given of his name is that it means 'thick-lipped'. On the whole, al-Shanfara belongs to a group of poets known as the brigands or Sa'alik. These poets thrived on defiance, alienation, and extreme contempt for tribal mores. Their poetry, assert Beeston et al., tells of their wild life as they sang defiantly of their "high ideals of liberty and exemplary conduct" (1983: 33). Use Lichtenstadter (1974: 24), though she sees in these poets a form of rising controversial individuality as opposed to mainstream subjectivity of the aggregate society, implicitly hints that al-Shanfara's individuality is tarnished by the fact that he adapts the conventional form and the regular style of mainstream tribal poets. For more details about al-Shanfara's life See Charles James Lyall, 2:68-69; al-Isbahani, xxi, 134.

² For the original text of the poem in Arabic and its classical explanation, See Muhammad ibn 'Umar al-Zamakhshari (BOOH: 40-78). As a matter of fact, many scholars have disputed the authorship of the poem. Taha Hussein, among others, expresses his suspicion of the authenticity of most of the so-called Jahiliyyah poetry. See Taha Hussein (1996). Stetkevych points out various sources that contested the authorship of the poem which on the main attribute it to the Basran poet-transmitter Khalf Al-Ahmar (d. 180/796). See Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych (1993: 119-23). Regardless of who confected the poem, what matters most for the purpose of this paper is the text itself, as an organic entity that reflects the moods and habits of its inhabitants. Al-Shanfara, however, is the authentic persona of "Lamiyyatu'l Arab" and it is his persona as painted vividly in this poem that I intend to discuss.

³ "Lamiyyatu'l Arab's" line 44 unequivocally equates the identity of the poet with that of his persona. Line 147, translated by Stetkevych, reads: "Then if war, the Mother of Dust, is grieved at al-Shanfara,/ yet her delight in him before was longer" (1993: 121).

raise questions about what the deserts "look like; what kinds of plants and animals (if any) live there; and how its human residents feed and clothe and defend themselves" (1994: 14).

Lamiyyatu'l Arab is different from conventional travel narratives because it is not meant in the first place to be one. The poem is in fact much more concerned with '*rahil*' rather than '*rihla*'. Both '*rahil*' and '*rihla*' are Arabic words, and are derived from the root word '*rahla*' which means, to depart. '*rihla*' means trip, journey, excursion, expedition and in its wider sense means travel. '*Rahil*' means to move, to depart, and often has negative connotations. Whereas '*rihla*' implies a return to the place of departure, '*rahil*' implies departure with no return to the place from where the journey is initiated. It also signifies both immigration and exile whether voluntary or by force.

In *Lamiyyatu'l Arab* Al-Shanfara initiates his poem by declaring his intention to travel away from home for reasons of his own, that are explicitly and implicitly stated in various sections of the poem. However, unlike the conventional travelogues' narratives, the reasons that motivate his *rahil*- his deep sense that he is not appreciated among his people whom he sees as inferior to himself, an extreme sense of individuality that ridicules the current social mores- are incompatible with the motives of conventional travelers that can be summed up in the traveler's desire to explore, seek knowledge, richness, fame or serve a cause and return home. Al-Shanfara has no intention of returning home and no intention of serving any cause. At the end of his journey he ends, may be temporarily, in a nameless, unpopulated alien place on the outskirts of the deserts he traversed.

As the poem revolves round the persona of its author, an initial reading of the text shows that al-Shanfara's account of his travel and self exile goes through five phases:

In the first phase (L. 1-20) the poet expresses his unequivocal desire to deviate from his tribe, as he is convinced of his superiority to his kinsmen whom he regards as decadents, hypocrites, cowards and effeminate. Unlike conventional travelers who travel in the company of others, al-Shanfara travels alone. Ironically, he substitutes his tribe with another tribe of beasts. Furthermore, he maintains a superior attitude to his wild hosts and companions. Naturally, his expression of superiority makes sense, at the beginning of his journey, as the traveler is still endowed with health and the material comfort he took along with him upon departure.⁴

⁴ Due to the ambiguity in line 2 one could conclude that provisions have been prepared for his journey, too. Stetkevych in her translation of the line resolved the ambiguity by assigning the preparation of provision for the departing tribes men and not for al-Shanfara. Her English line reads: "The provisions have been readied, the night is moonlit, /The mounts strapped and

In the first three lines, the traveler expresses his heart felt desire to leave his tribe in the middle of the night to unknown destination. In the fourth line, the poet swears by the lives of his readers: "By your life, no harm on earth will befall a man who travels by night, /Whether by free will or force, if he has his wits about him."⁵ He then, asserts his willful decision to leave his tribe and kinsmen for another family. His new kinsmen, as he asserts in line 5 are " a wolf, swift and sleek, a smooth and spotted leopard and a long-maned hyena." The traveler then highlights his positive personal traits in an attempt to show his readers that he is of a much noble caliber than his new kinsmen. For instance, in spite of the ferocity of the wild beasts he prescribes to and chooses as his travel companions, he tells us that he is superior to them in hunting and chasing the hunt; and when it comes to consuming the hunt, he claims "not to be the quickest" (L 8) in helping himself to the food as a sign of his graciousness. Then he devotes ten lines from 11-20 to develop his concept of masculinity, as he perceives it in himself: strong body, brave heart, dexterity at using arms, generous, and macho-man. This section of the poem is concluded with his hyperbolic assertion that "when the ground, hard and flint-strewn, strikes my hoofs, sparks and splinters fly." (L. 20)

In the second phase (L. 21-41) the poem reveals the gradual deterioration in the traveler's social, psychological and physical status. Life in the wilderness proves to be so hard and self-dilapidating; yet he still, in spite of the initial hardships, maintains his claim to high moral grounds, honor, authenticity, altruism and chivalry. The poet's supplies of food hinted at in the second line - "The provisions have been readied"- are exhausted. Thus the poet enters a phase of prolonged hunger and tries his best to ignore the pain of starvation. In his attempt to do so, he swallows soil to appease his agonized intestines. Eventually, he is reduced to a status of a starving, invalid wolf, hungry and thirsty that races with a formation of sand grouse landing on a spot of water to drink first.

In the third phase (L. 42-53) the traveler reveals with horrifying precision the weakness of his body as a result of the sever hunger and hardships he has been through in the desert. His body is transformed into a heap of fleshless bones:

saddled for your journeys ends." (142) In fact, the Arabic text does not have the possessive "your". It simply says that provisions have been readied on mounts for ends. As a result, the ambiguity of the expression paves the way for another reading that assumes provisions are prepared for him, too.

⁵ For the English translation of this and the subsequent verses of *Lamiyyatu'l Arab* see Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, 143-150

I am familiar with the earth's face
When I take it as my bed
On a firm back raised
By desiccated vertebrae

For a cushion I take an arm, fleshless,
Its joints like gambler's bones
When he casts them forth,
So they stand out. (L. 42-3)

Due to his weakness, he sees himself as a source of shame and frustration to War as he implicitly recalls his previous glory in the battlefield:

Then if War, the Mother of Dust,
Is grieved at al-Shanfara,
Yet her delight in him before
Was longer." (L. 44)

Furthermore, his loneliness in the desert conjures up all the demons of the past that arrive like a swarm of deadly bees to haunt his dreams and torment his soul:

I am an outcast hunted by crimes
That draw lots for his flesh;
The winner gets the first choice
From his carcass.

Whenever he sleeps,
They sleep, wide eyed,
Quick to harm him,
Piercing.

One accustomed to cares
That ever return to tend him,
Like quartan fever,
Or even graver.

When they come to drink,
I disperse them,
But then they regroup
Coming from above and from below. (L. 45-8)

Also, his prolonged sojourn in the desert with no food, drink or shelter reduced his status to that of a snake slithering naked on the burning desert sands:

You see me, like the snake,
The sands daughter,
Exposed to the sun, weakened,
Barefoot and shoeless, (L. 49)

In spite of all these evils, the traveler, refusing to admit defeat, puts on a show of bravado by convincing himself that he is still in possession of some moral traits such as patience, content, wisdom and self-esteem that his fellow tribesmen do not have:

Know that I am the master of endurance;
I don its cloth
Like a shirt on a heart like a young wolf's;
I am shod with determination.

I am at times in want,
At others, not in need;
He who attains riches is the ambitious man,
Heedless of his honor.

I am not impatient over poverty,
Exposing it,
Nor, overweening,
Do I exult in riches.

Intemperance does not scorn
My forbearance,
Nor am I to be seen begging,
Rumor mongering. (L. 50-3)

In the fourth phase of the journey (L. 54-66) the poem colorfully illustrates the traveler's transformation into a full savage in the wilderness. After the sad experience of burning his beloved well-crafted and decorated bow and arrows to heat his weak and embattled body, he turns into a deadly beast driven by sheer instinct for survival. He becomes one of the desert marauders whom Charles M. Doughty terribly labels as "the demons of this wild waste earth, ever ready to assail passengers" (1908: 33) He attacks a caravan at night in a demonic way and "widows women and orphans

children" (L. 57) and thus loses all claims to any moral ground he has talked off earlier in the text. Then in tatters, under the burning heat of the sun and the gushing winds of the desert, in deplorable bodily condition, and extreme dirtiness he traverses a desert from one end to the other evading and dodging his illusionary or /and real pursuers.

Many a day of the Dog Star,
 When the heat waves melt,
 And the vipers writhe restlessly
 On the scorching earth,
 I faced straight on,
 No covering to shield me
 Nor any veil, except
 A tattered cloak,
 And a full long hair;
 When the wind blows
 Its matted dreadlocks fly up on all side,
 Uncombed.
 Long since the touch
 Of balm or delousing,
 It is full and caked with filth;
 For a full year unwashed.
 Many a windswept plain, like the back of a shield,
 A barren waste,
 Its back not to be crossed,
 On my two legs I crossed.
 I joined its end to its beginning,
 Looking out from a summit,
 Now sitting, knees drawn up;
 Now standing. (L. 61-66)

And in the fifth and last phase of the journey (L. 67-68) the last two lines abruptly terminate the poem in a contrived way, which shows that the traveler is either suddenly resting, or dropping dead after a long exhausting marathon across hell. In these lines the traveller presents his reader with an image of paradise-like place where he sees himself as a male deer surrounded by flocks of female deer who look like veiled virgins:

The dust-hued mountain deer
 Roamed around me,
 As if they were maidens
 Trailing long-trained gowns.

Toward sunset motionless they stood about me,
 As among the white footed deer I were
 A long horned buck, heading for the mountain peek,
 Unassailable. (L. 67-68)

A close reading of the poem shows very clearly that the traveler's early assertion that no harm will befall a traveler in the wild and wide land is not true: "By your life, no harm on earth will befall a man who travels by night,/Whether by free will or force, if he has his wits about him." (L. 1) For the rest of the poem from lines 21 till 66 show the falsity of the poet's initial assertion as they demonstrate the agony and extreme hardships the traveler went through in the desert. His life is seen, contrary to his earlier assumptions, as extremely painful and demonizing. He suffers extreme hunger until he becomes like a weakling wolf; he suffers extreme heat and extreme cold to the extent that he burns his beloved bow and arrows to heat his diminishing body; he suffers reduction in weight and size and loss of flesh to the extent that he becomes as skinny and slimy as a desert snake; and he suffers extreme reduction in his garments and cleanliness until his long hair becomes like a tail of a camel marinated in its urine and excrement, peppered by the desert sand and dried by the burning desert sun.

Though some of the deserts traversed by al-Shanfara are relatively inhabited with life, this does not make them any better in his eyes and the eyes of their inhabitants. In fact, the desert is seen in the poem as a damned, horrible place. It is not a place to be lived in but by necessity it has to be crossed. Unlike latter European romantic travel accounts of the desert⁶, in the poem the desert is seen as a section of hell on earth. The creatures that inhabit it or traverse it, including wolves and people, are famished and constantly weakened by their sheer presence there. Lines 26-34, 45-49 of the poem give a detailed image of the impoverishment of body and soul of the

"For instance, Pierre Loti, a literati traveler, views the desert through rose-tinted glasses, writes with great fondness about his experiences traveling in the Arabian deserts. In his narratives he focuses on the magical silence of the desert and the lulling pace of the camels in the middle of "pinkly empty vast space" (1993: 26). Similar romantic view of the desert is well vocalized by Brosman who sees the desert as a "source of life, beauty and infinite freedom" (2001: 121). Apparently, it is such romantic notions of the desert that urged Dirole to issue a warning against picturing the desert as a convalescent home or a place to retire to: "what a misconception this is! The desert enriches only those who are already rich. It strengthens only the strong" (1956: 18).

desert travellers. The wolves, in spite of their strength and endurance, are rendered by the barrenness of the desert into weakling creatures hardly able to drag themselves from one place to another in search of what might sustain their lives. The same goes for al-Shanfara, except that his plight is more than that of his feral comrades. In addition to his weakened body, his soul is immensely tortured by his loneliness in a semi eternal vastness of aridity. Also, the desert, in the poem, is the abode of snakes, which in turn represent fear, death and evil. Al-Shanfara admits that after a prolonged stay in the desert, he becomes like the desert snake slithering unshod and in tatters under the burning sun of that horrendous place. (L. 49) He then turns into an evil marauder who remorselessly and unashamedly admits to attacking and killing men in a fiendish way:

I widowed women
And orphaned children,
Then returned as I set out,
The black night blacker still (L. 56)

Even the birds that land on the water there have to fly away in a hurry the way the "caravans of *Uhazah* flee the desert in alarm." (L. 41) This view of the desert is not different from Robert Horn's account of Choi Jong Yul, the first person ever in the 20th century to walk across the Sahara desert. Though Yul traveled the desert with a huge team of supporters at his back, shielded and protected by 20th century high technology, and well fed on chocolates and other delicacies with no want for water, medicine and proper clothing, he declares that he thought the desert would be beautiful, but all he "saw was suffering, people struggling for the most basic necessities, like clean water." He, however, adds: "yet people find a way to live." (1997: 4) Yul's reflection is somewhat similar to Lawrence's (1991) who wrote in *The Seven Pillars of wisdom* that life in the desert is terrible; it is death in life where no man can live and emerge unchanged. It is true, that people there manage to live and they change, too. But with the specter of death lurking under each and every sand granule in this eternal wilderness, peoples' existence in the desert turns into a tale of horror.

Thus, in al-Shanfara's *rahil*, the desert becomes a symbol of evil, temporarily occupied -and not inhabited- by creatures on their way out of it. Al-Shanfara eventually got out of it. In lines 65-66, the poet gladly asserts that he finally traversed on foot a desert, as plain and barren as the back of a shield, from its beginning till its end, often a time crouching on tops of mounds to observe his pursuers if there is any. It is then, and out of the desert, that al-Shanfara had a communion with the inhabitants of the hills and mountains. His final encounter with the mountain deer that he resembles

to veiled beautiful maidens enhances the point that life exists out side the desert.

Traveling alone into the desert costs dearly. The final scene in the poem, in which the traveler compares himself to a deer, points strongly to a radical change in the traveler's perception of himself as he has been tamed by his encounter with the reality of the desert. His reference to himself as a male deer among female deer stands in sharp contrast to his earlier boasting that his new family is made of wolves, lions and hyenas and that he is their match and superior.⁷ The deer in Arabic literature and in the Arab mind is a metaphor for female beauty and a symbol of elegance and playfulness, and is totally seen as the other of the previously mentioned animals. Thus, the last two lines reveal a dismaying metamorphosis in the personality of al-Shanfara from a predator to a potential hunt for the desert predators. His experience in the desert has reduced the intensity of his views of the constituents of radical masculinity, and makes him akin to the men he talks against in lines 15-18. In these lines he describes himself as a macho man. He cogently stresses the great difference between his behavior and that of domesticated and homely men of the tribe whose main concerns are their looks, coif and courting, and who would council and engage their wives in their affairs. Ironically, at the end of his journey he turns into what he earlier abhorred before his entrance into the desert.

As Trinh T. Minh-ha writes, "Every voyage is the unfolding of a poetic. The departure, the cross-over, the fall, the wandering, the discovery, the return, the transformation." Traveling, Minh-ha adds, perhaps more than any other activity "perpetuates a discontinuous state of being" (Robertson, et al., 1994: 21). This is what Curtis and Pajaczkowska term as "Traveled awareness." This awareness facilitates the "return to a preverbal, primitive, more physically and sensually grounded response to reality" (Robertson, et al., 1994: 207). In fact what Minh-ha, Curtis and Pajaczkowska propose is true of al-Shanfara:

1- Al-Shanfara's *Rahil* resulted above all in the production of a magnificent work of art, the infamous "Lamiyyatu'l Arab." In this way the unfolding of the poetic is fully realized.

2- Al-Shanfara's *rahil*, or one-way journey from home, involves naturally his departure from his tribe, the fall in the crucible of physical and psychological hardships, the wondering in the form of plodding from one desert to another. Though there is no return in al-Shanfara's trip, his exit from the last desert space at the end of the poem, and his finding himself in what looks like a desert oasis with deer and mountain goats around can

⁷ Line 5 reads: "I have closer kin than you, /a wolf, swift and sleek, /a smooth and spotted leopard, /and a long-maned-hyena."

easily be marked as a sign of return. This return is marked by his transformation. As I have mentioned earlier, traveling through the desert changes the traveler's personality and his perception of himself. The poem is inaugurated with the traveler's expression of his intent on replacing his kinsmen with predators and his assertion of his ferocity, endurance and sense of radical masculinity. The journey into the desert eventually transforms the traveler into a deer surrounded by female deer.

3- Al-Shanfara's transformation perpetuates his discontinuous state of being. He starts his journey with a mindset and ends it with another. This discontinuity is shown in his emphasis, at the very beginning of the journey, on his superior moral values that egg him to leave his decadent kinsmen while he himself, in fact, is deprived of any moral values. We only realize this discontinuity in the traveler's being when he resorts to killing other innocent men to feed on whatever he finds in their possession. Though he seems to be proud of his deed, he refuses to think of what he did as an act of killing and consequently he refers to it euphemistically: "I widowed women/ And orphaned children." (L. 56) The masking by euphemism of the atrocity of his deed, and the masking, by implicit sexual virility, of his transformation from a predator to a potential hunt at the end of the poem reflect what Curtis and Pajaczkowska refer to as "traveled awareness" (Robertson, et al., 1994: 207).

4- Al-Shanfara blatantly takes pride of his return to the primitive. His affinities with the world of animals, with no expressed desire to return to the human sphere he left at the beginning of his journey are sufficient signs of his complete regression into the primitive state. In fact, by his traveling solo in the desert with nothing around him other than the scorching heat of the sun, the burning desert sand and the beasts, he willingly slips into a preverbal stage where language is a liability rather than an asset as he desires to become a kin to the beasts of the wilderness:

I have closer kin than you,
A wolf, swift and sleek,
A smooth and spotted leopard
And a long-maned-hyena

They are kin among whom a secret, once confided,
Is not revealed;
Nor is the criminal forsaken
For his crimes. (L. 5-6)

When he attacks a caravan of travelers and kills several men, he boasts about his bestiality and takes pride in the fact that the people attacked thought that their attacker is a wild ferocious beast or a demon:

If it was one of the jinn,
Then he is a more sinister night visitor;
And if it was a man-
Men do not act like that! (L. 60)

Al-Shanfara's simulation of bestiality is nothing but a strong desire to delve into a primitive stage and remain and die if necessary there.

To conclude, al-Shanfara's account of his journey across the desert in the company of the wild beasts proves to be very unpleasant, traumatic and has ended in the transformation of the personality of the traveler as a result of his relentless interaction with the desert. John Van Dyke succinctly and accurately describes life in the desert in a way that illuminates what befell al-Shanfara in his travels. For Van Dyke the desert is "peculiarly savage." It is a "show of teeth in bush and beast and reptile. At every turn one feels the presence of the barb and thorn, the jaw and paw, the beak and talon, the sting and the poison thereof (1901: 56). Ibn Battutah confirms, in his travel book, the treacherous nature of the desert and cautions that "he who enters it is lost, and he who leaves it is born" (2002: 43). The final image presented by the traveler of himself as a male deer surrounded by female deer upon his emergence from the desert is problematic. In the light of the traveler's earlier affirmation of his ferocity and bestiality, his concluding lines carry the possibility of several meanings. On the one hand, his transformation from a predator to a potential hunt is a metaphor of death incurred through his interface with the desert; on the other hand, it can be seen as a humble rebirth. His implicit assertion of his sexuality by seeing the mountain deer as veiled maidens circling him is a jovial expression to celebrate his emerging alive from the belly of death.

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