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Q: 188 ? Title: I want to know the status of literature (poetry, folktales, etc.) in Islam. I heard from someone that poetry is forbidden based on hadith when Umar (ra) hit and rebuked someone...

Question

I want to know the status? of literature (poetry, folktales, etc.) in Islam. I heard from someone that poetry is forbidden based on hadith when Umar (ra) hit and rebuked someone who told the unnecessary story. Is the hadith true? Is it not permissible to make a poetry? Please tell me according Qur'an and Sunnah. May Allah endows u a virtue as your gratitude.

Answer

In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful

Assalaamu `alaykum waRahmatullahi Wabarakatuh

Firstly, before mentioning the ruling of poetry in light of Shari'ah, it is important to mention the status of poetry in society before and during the time of Rasulullah (Sallallahu Alayhi

Wasallam). A majority of the following is taken from the book *Slippery Stone-an inquiry into Islam's stance on music?* which is authored by Khalid Baig. This book may be referred to for more details:

It is generally known that poetry was the highest achievement and the pride of Arab society. Poets enjoyed roughly the same kind of power that is displayed today by the mass media. And nearly the same concern for truth and justice. The might of their eloquence was unmistakable. They could manipulate emotions of love and anger. They could build or sink reputations. They could initiate wars.

The pre-Islamic Arab poets were people who wielded great power and a broken moral compass to guide and control it. They were preoccupied with love and war, with nothing more than ego, greed, and tribalism governing these enterprises as well as their versification of them. In a society where one did not want to be on the wrong side of a powerful poet, Islam did the unimaginable: In one verse it took *all* the poets to task for their waywardness. At the same time it made an exception for those who were committed to using the power of poetry in the service of virtue. Allah Ta'ala says in the Holy Quran:

????????? ?????? ???????? (224) ??? ?? ????? ?? ?? ??? ?????? (225) ????? ??????
?? ?? ?????? (226) ??? ?????? ?????? ?????? ?????????? ?????? ?????? ??????????
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?As for the poets, they are followed by the straying people. Did you not see that they wander in every valley, and that they say what they do not? Except those who believe and do righteous deeds and remember Allah very much, and defend themselves after they are wronged. And the wrongdoers will soon know to which place they are going to return.? (26:224-227)

This was a devastating blow to the errant behavior of the poets and their ignorant followers. But it was not meant to ban all poetry; it was meant to transform it into a force for good, not evil. It is reported in *Musannaf ibn Abi Shaybah* that Abdullah ibn Rawahah, Hassan ibn Thabit, and Ka'b ibn Malik (RadiyAllahu Anhum) came crying to the Prophet (Sallallahu Alayhi Wasallam) when this verse was revealed. They said, ?O Prophet of Allah, Allah revealed this verse and He knows we are poets.? The Prophet (Sallallahu Alayhi Wasallam) said, ?Read what follows it (i.e. the exception following the condemnation). This applies to you.? He also said, ?Defend, but do not say anything except the truth. And do not mention the forefathers and mothers (i.e. do not make them the objects of your satire).? (Tafsir al-Qurtubi)

Rasulullah (Sallallahu Alayhi Wasallam) himself used to enjoy listening to verses of poetry containing wisdom. It is reported in a Hadith from 'Amr ibn al-Sharid who reported from his father who said, 'One day I was riding with the Messenger of Allah (Sallallahu Alayhi Wasallam) and he asked, 'Do you remember any poems from Umayyah ibn Abi'l-Salt?' I said yes. He said, 'Go ahead.' So I recited one verse. Then he asked for more and I recited another one. Then he asked for more. (This continued) until I had recited to him one hundred verses.' (Sahih Muslim)

As for the Sahaba (RadiyAllahu Anhum) and poetry, Ibn 'Abd al-Barr said that all the senior companions and scholars and people worth following either composed poetry or listened to it happily when it contained wisdom or permissible content; i.e. it did not contain lewdness, obscenities, or hurt for other Muslims. (Tafsir al-Qurtubi)

The Khulafa also took action against those who mentioned evil in their poetry. Umar (RadiyAllahu Anhu) discharged one of his officials in the time of his khilafah for his objectionable poetry. This official was Nu'man ibn 'Adi ibn Nadlah in Basra. Once when he wrote some words, Umar (RadiyAllahu Anhu) wrote him, 'Your words have reached me. And it does displease me. I have discharged you.' (Tafsir Ibn Kathir)

After the time of the Khulafa Rashideen when Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz (Rahmatullah Alayhi) was khalifah, he expelled al-Ahwas, who was a poet known for his evil and wickedness. (Tafsir al-Qurtubi)

We can see from the above that Islam presented a very clear notion of good and bad poetry, inculcated those values in its followers, and used its powers to promote the good and suppress the bad.

As for the ruling of poetry in light of Shari'ah, the scholar Abul-Hasan al-Mawardi sums it up beautifully and puts poetry in three categories, desirable, permissible, and prohibited. He says it is desirable if it admonishes against indulgence in this world or attracts one to the Hereafter or encourages noble qualities; it is permissible (i.e. neutral) if it is free of any indecencies and lies; it is forbidden when it is tainted by lies or indecencies. (Ruh-al-Ma'ani)

Finally, it is important to also mention that excessive involvement in poetry or any other art which will make one oblivious to the remembrance of Allah Ta'ala and causes doubts in the mind about beliefs of Islam or helps in promoting spiritual ills will fall under the same ruling as is given for contemptible poetry. Rasulullah (Sallallahu Alayhi Wasallam) said:

??? ?????? ??? ?????? ????? ??? ?? ?? ?? ?????? ?????

*?That your belly should be filled with pus is better than that it should be filled with poetry?
(Sahih al-Bukhari)*

Imam Bukhari (Rahmatullah Alayhi) has explained that according to his understanding this statement portrays the situation when the poetry becomes dominant over the remembrance of Allah Ta'ala, or in one's involvement with the Quran or acquiring knowledge. (Ma'ariful Quran)

In conclusion, poetry is permissible according to Shari'ah when its contents are permissible and it does not cause one to neglect their obligations towards Allah Ta'ala. It is prohibited when it contains lies or obscenities and causes one to neglect their duties towards Allah Ta'ala.

(Slippery Stone, P. 15-26, Openmind Press)

(Ma'ariful Quran, 6/562-564)

And Allah knows best

Wassalamu Alaikum

I want to know the status of literature (poetry, folktales, etc.) in Islam. I heard from someone that poetry is

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