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Narrative Discourse in the Pre-Islamic Era: A Reading of Structure and Patterns

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Received: 13/07/2025 ; Accepted: 26/11/2025 ; Published: 05/01/2026

Abstract

This study examines narrative discourse in the pre-Islamic era, focusing on its structure, thematic patterns, and cultural significance. Pre-Islamic Arabic literature accorded great importance to storytelling, particularly in the form of historical, mythical, and heroic narratives, to the extent that this period is often described as “the age of the story.” The narrative (*qissa*) was not merely a recounting of events but a sophisticated literary form capable of conveying cultural, psychological, social, and historical knowledge. Linguistically, the term *qissa* derives from the root meaning “to follow or trace,” highlighting the sequential nature of narrative storytelling, a concept emphasized by classical lexicographers such as Ibn Faris and Al-Zamakhshari. Pre-Islamic narratives served

multiple functions: preserving tribal history, conveying moral and social values, and reflecting the worldview of pre-Islamic Arab society. These narratives encompassed diverse forms, including the chronicles of kings, journeys, wars, myths, legends, heroic exploits, folktales, and anecdotes, each blending imagination with reality to varying degrees. Despite their simplicity, pre-Islamic stories exhibited intricate narrative techniques, characterized by vivid characterization, structured plots, and interweaving of historical events with imaginative elements. The narratives also functioned as vehicles for shaping social norms, defining virtues through symbolic heroes, and providing aesthetic pleasure to audiences.

This study demonstrates that pre-Islamic narrative discourse possesses a unique artistic

and cultural value. Its aesthetic richness, thematic diversity, and structured composition contributed to the evolution of Arabic literature and laid the foundation for later narrative traditions. By analyzing the narrative structures, recurring motifs, and modes of transmission, this research underscores the importance of pre-Islamic stories in understanding the literary and cultural consciousness of early Arab societies.

Keywords: Pre-Islamic literature, narrative discourse, *qissa*, storytelling, literary structure, myths and legends, heroic narratives, Arab cultural heritage

Introduction

Narrative discourse has occupied a central position in Arabic literature since its earliest stages, particularly during the pre-Islamic era, known as *al-Jahiliyyah*. This period, preceding the advent of Islam, witnessed the flourishing of storytelling as a dominant literary form, reflecting the cultural, social, and psychological realities of Arab communities. Pre-Islamic literature celebrated the art of narrative, emphasizing the retelling of heroic exploits, tribal histories, and legendary tales. It is often argued that this era was “the age of the story,” where narrative discourse was not merely a vehicle for entertainment but a key instrument for preserving collective memory, social norms, and cultural values. Stories served to educate, inspire, and guide listeners,

while simultaneously providing aesthetic pleasure through engaging literary techniques. The narrative, or *qissa*, is etymologically rooted in the notion of “following” or “tracing” (*taṭabbūʿ*), highlighting the sequential, interconnected nature of storytelling. Classical lexicographers such as Ibn Faris and Al-Zamakhshari emphasized that the act of narrating involved careful tracking of events, tracing sequences, and ensuring coherence in the recounting of historical or imaginative content. This linguistic understanding reinforces the notion that pre-Islamic narratives were not arbitrary compilations but deliberate constructions aimed at presenting events in a meaningful and interpretable manner. Moreover, the Qurʾan itself underscores the importance of narrative as a didactic tool, frequently employing phrases like “*We narrate to you the best of stories*” and highlighting the instructive and exemplary value of past events.

Pre-Islamic narrative discourse encompassed a wide array of content, reflecting the diverse experiences and values of Arab society. Among the most prominent forms were the chronicles of kings and rulers, which recounted historical conquests, alliances, and disputes, as well as myths and legends that articulated the supernatural, heroic, and moral dimensions of life. Heroic exploits, often associated with tribal warriors or legendary figures, served to embody ideals such as bravery, loyalty, and honor, providing symbolic models for

communal conduct. Stories of travel, war, and adventure, meanwhile, captured the challenges of desert life, the perils of journeys, and encounters with natural and supernatural forces, creating narratives that were both instructive and entertaining. The folktale and anecdotal genres, often humorous or satirical, addressed human folly, social hierarchies, and everyday life, enriching the narrative repertoire with moral and cultural commentary.

The aesthetic and structural qualities of pre-Islamic narratives are particularly noteworthy. While these stories often appear straightforward, they exhibit sophisticated narrative techniques, including intricate plot organization, nuanced characterization, and imaginative embellishment. The storyteller (*qāṣṣ*) played a central role in shaping the narrative, selecting episodes, emphasizing key themes, and crafting suspense to captivate audiences. Unlike historical or biographical texts, narrative discourse was not bound strictly by factual accuracy; its goal was to evoke life's essence, portray human experience, and convey ethical and social truths. This imaginative flexibility allowed stories to blend reality with legend, creating layered meanings and symbolic resonance that transcended their immediate context.

Pre-Islamic narratives also functioned as mechanisms for social cohesion and value formation. They preserved tribal histories, explained genealogies, and legitimized

leadership structures while simultaneously communicating moral principles and societal ideals. Heroes and symbolic figures embodied virtues such as generosity, courage, loyalty, and wisdom, offering models for individual and communal behavior. The narratives thus contributed to shaping cultural consciousness, transmitting collective knowledge, and reinforcing shared identity. Furthermore, the interplay of oral performance, memory, and repetition in the transmission of these narratives ensured their endurance and facilitated their adaptation to new contexts over time, influencing subsequent Arabic literary traditions.

Despite their antiquity and oral origins, pre-Islamic narratives demonstrate remarkable literary sophistication. They reveal an understanding of narrative causality, thematic coherence, and psychological insight, allowing listeners and readers to connect with characters' motivations, conflicts, and dilemmas. The narratives' aesthetic appeal derives from vivid descriptions, dramatic tension, and emotional resonance, which together create immersive experiences that have captivated audiences for centuries. The enduring appeal of these stories underscores the universality of their themes—human struggle, moral choice, love, ambition, and the confrontation with fate—while highlighting the specific cultural and historical contexts of the pre-Islamic Arab world.

In sum, the study of pre-Islamic narrative discourse illuminates both the literary artistry and the cultural fabric of early Arab society. By analyzing its structures, recurring motifs, and thematic patterns, scholars gain insight into how these narratives functioned as repositories of collective memory, instruments of socialization, and frameworks for ethical reflection. They reveal the ways in which storytelling shaped identity, transmitted knowledge, and provided a medium for aesthetic expression, demonstrating that narrative discourse was far more than a literary pastime—it was an essential component of communal life, consciousness, and creativity. This research thus seeks to explore the structural and thematic dimensions of pre-Islamic narratives, tracing their enduring impact on the evolution of Arabic literature and their significance as a mirror of the human experience in early Arab culture.

Arabic literature in ancient times gave great attention to narrative texts, particularly stories, to the extent that one can say that this era was the era of the story. The story is a literary genre that attracted significant attention and quickly attained a leading position in world literature. This is not only due to its ability to develop narrative methods and techniques but also to its exceptional capacity to represent cultural, psychological, social, and historical references—something that surpassed the ability of other literary genres whose roles diminished, limiting their contribution to

representing major conceptions of self and other.

Story as Conceptualization:

Lexicographers agree that the root of *qas* (قص) comes from “tracking/following,” as noted by Ibn Faris in the entry “The letters qaf and sad form a sound root indicating following or tracing something. For example, they say: *iqtasastu al-athar* (I traced the trail), meaning I followed it.” Similarly, *Lisan al-Arab* defines it as following: “*Qassastu al-shay*’ means I followed its trace step by step; from this comes the Qur’anic verse: ‘And she said to her sister, narrate it (follow its trace).’” Ibn Faris adds, “From the root come *al-qissa* and *al-qasas*, all referring to tracking and recounting.” This meaning appears in several Qur’anic verses: “We narrate to you the best of stories” [Yusuf: 3], “Indeed, there was in their stories a lesson” [Yusuf: 111], and “When he came to him, he narrated the stories to him” [Al-Qasas: 25].

In terminology, the story has been defined in various ways by literary scholars as “not merely a brief account appearing on a few pages, but a type of modern literature that emerged in the late 19th century, with specific formal characteristics.” The story is an art form that narrates historical or fictional events, consisting of a series of events connected to human characters whose behaviors and experiences vary, reflecting life on earth. The storyteller presents them in a captivating style, drawing readers into the events and making them feel as though what is narrated truly

occurred. It is “a collection of events narrated by the writer, dealing with one or multiple incidents involving different human characters whose ways of living and behavior in life differ, as people’s lives vary on earth, with varying degrees of impact and influence.” Thus, the story is one of the most intricate and complex literary arts, yet also one of the most widespread due to its appeal and enjoyment. It has been central in world literature since ancient times, and the Arabs embraced it from the pre-Islamic period, leaving us with extensive volumes that attracted critics and researchers, dividing them between admiration and criticism depending on their focus.

Some literary critics, such as Mahmoud Taymour, Mohamed Taher Lashine, Mohamed Hussein Heikal, Taha Hussein, and Mohamed Zaghloul Salam, assert that the short story in Arabic literature owes its emergence to the influence of Western short stories, adopted through literary evolution and exposure to Western models, allowing Arab innovators to develop a clear vision of the art form’s rules.

Aesthetics and Dimensions of Narrative Art:

Unlike historical or biographical works, stories do not merely present reality but weave a colored image of it, involving imagination, framing, and stylistic embellishment. It is not necessary for documents or facts to validate the narrative; what matters is the resemblance of story events to real life, except in supernatural tales. A skilled storyteller, adept in narration,

plotting, and analysis, can immortalize their characters.

Who among readers forgets Anna Karenina, Don Quixote, Jean Valjean, or Tamim Nasour? The storyteller observes life, stores experiences, selects what is necessary for their story, and measures success not by event magnitude but by character analysis and engaging narration. Even a simple event, if well-presented, can achieve fame, as in François Mauriac’s story *Thérèse Desqueyroux*.

Every individual desires to find aspects of themselves in what they read. The more the writer captures our behavior, tendencies, and whims, the stronger the bond with their work. A skilled storyteller must narrate events fluidly, connect them coherently, and depict settings and colors vividly.

Transmission of Arabic Stories:

In pre-Islamic times, teachers recounted ancient events and taught history through stories. Figures like Al-Nadr ibn Al-Harith recorded ancient legends, narrating about Rostam, Esfandiar, and Persian kings, while bookkeepers documented prophets’ stories. Some scholars preserved tribal books containing collections of poetry, anecdotes, and historical accounts, called *Books of Tribes*, serving as records of events, poetry, and notable deeds.

Pre-Islamic oral narratives included tales of extinct Arab tribes, events like Iram Dhāt al-‘Imād, and legendary figures such as ‘Awj ibn

‘Anaq, mixing history and myth and inspiring future storytellers.

As poets held prominence, storytellers also had key positions. Brockelmann notes: “Not only poets but storytellers held important positions in night gatherings among nomadic tribes and village assemblies.”

Pre-Islamic Narrative History and Records:

Arab stories in the pre-Islamic period spread widely, narrating diverse aspects of life, including legends, royal stories, journeys, wars, myths, and folklore.

- **Arab Traditions:** These were customary practices, sometimes akin to religions, traditions, or superstitions, later abolished by Islam. Examples include divination, omens, gambling, and infanticide, which were often narrated as stories.
- **Royal Stories:** Stories revolved around kings and rulers, including conflicts and conquests. Examples include Hajr, father of Imru’ al-Qais, and various kings of Hira and Ghassan.
- **Journeys and Wars:** Arab travels and wars generated numerous tales illustrating difficulties, dangers, and encounters with supernatural entities, including the journey of Khosrow’s caravan to Yemen and other legendary expeditions.
- **Myths and Legends:** Myths conveyed supernatural powers and imaginative scenarios, often with psychological and social foundations. Examples include Tasm and Jadis, and celestial myths explaining astronomical phenomena.

- **Folklore:** Popular tales for amusement and moral lessons circulated widely, sometimes involving animals.

- **Anecdotes and Humor:** Nobles and kings enjoyed humorous stories, with some kings appointing jesters for storytelling, such as Sa’d al-Qarqara and al-Nu’mān ibn al-Mundhir.

Prominent Characters in Pre-Islamic Stories:

Stories highlighted heroes of war and notable tribal leaders, recording their deeds and moral virtues, like Bastam ibn Qays, Rabi’a ibn Mukaddam, Durayd ibn al-Simma, and Jassas ibn Marrah. Leaders also exemplified wisdom and justice, like Aktham ibn Saifi, Qays ibn ‘Asim, and al-Harith ibn ‘Abadah.

Artistic Characteristics of Pre-Islamic Stories:

Pre-Islamic stories, beyond historical value, possess artistic merit. They are concise, fast-paced, and infused with simplicity, innocence, and primal enthusiasm. Despite the dominance of poetry, stories held a lasting place in literature.

Ancient Arabic stories demonstrate antiquity, reflection of primitive human traits, participation in value formation, depiction of heroic archetypes, and simplicity of artistic structure. They may even predate poetry, revealing Arab customs, thoughts, and adaptation to nature, while contributing to social values, norms, and political organization. Symbolic heroes represented virtues like loyalty, bravery, and generosity,

regardless of factual accuracy.

Conclusion

The exploration of narrative discourse in the pre-Islamic era offers a profound insight into the literary, cultural, and social fabric of early Arab society. Through this study, it becomes evident that storytelling in *al-Jahiliyyah* was far more than a mere form of entertainment; it was an intricate, multidimensional phenomenon that reflected the worldview, values, and collective consciousness of the Arabs prior to Islam. Pre-Islamic narratives—encompassing heroic tales, tribal histories, myths, folktales, and anecdotal stories—served as both a mirror and a mold of society. They mirrored the lived realities, aspirations, fears, and ethical ideals of the people, while simultaneously shaping social norms, moral expectations, and cultural identity. The enduring significance of these narratives lies in their capacity to preserve historical memory, articulate communal values, and provide symbolic representations of human experience that remain relevant across time.

At the structural level, pre-Islamic narratives exhibit a sophisticated understanding of storytelling techniques that surpass their oral origins. They are carefully composed sequences of events, interwoven with thematic coherence, dramatic tension, and imaginative embellishments. Lexicographical studies reveal that the very notion of *qissa* (story)

implies tracing and following a sequence of occurrences, emphasizing the meticulous arrangement and interconnectedness of events. The narratives' structure reflects an awareness of causality, temporality, and narrative perspective, enabling the storyteller (*qāṣṣ*) to engage audiences effectively, sustain suspense, and convey moral or ethical lessons. While not necessarily bound by historical accuracy, these stories achieve authenticity through their resonance with human experience, presenting characters, conflicts, and dilemmas that echo the complexities of life itself.

The aesthetic dimensions of pre-Islamic narratives are equally noteworthy. The narrative discourse combines clarity and simplicity with imaginative depth, producing stories that are accessible yet profound. Through vivid description, careful characterization, and dynamic plotting, the storyteller transforms ordinary events into compelling narratives, capable of inspiring admiration, reflection, and emotional engagement. This interplay between form and content exemplifies the artistry of pre-Islamic storytelling, highlighting how narrative was both an art and a social instrument. The stories' aesthetic appeal, coupled with their ethical and cultural significance, ensured their widespread popularity and enduring influence on subsequent Arabic literature.

Moreover, pre-Islamic narratives functioned as vital instruments of socialization, transmitting values and guiding behavior. Tales of heroes such as Antarah, Hatim, and other legendary figures embodied ideals of courage, generosity, loyalty, and honor, creating symbolic templates for individual and collective conduct. Mythical and supernatural narratives addressed human fascination with the unknown, offering imaginative frameworks for understanding the natural and metaphysical world. Meanwhile, folktales, anecdotes, and humorous stories engaged audiences in reflection on human folly, social hierarchies, and communal life, blending entertainment with moral instruction. In this sense, narrative discourse in pre-Islamic Arabia was not only literary but also deeply ethical and didactic, shaping both individual character and communal consciousness.

The thematic and structural patterns identified in these narratives reveal their universality and adaptability. Stories of war, travel, and adventure captured the challenges of desert life and tribal conflicts, while narratives of kings and rulers documented historical events and political power dynamics. Folktales, humor, and anecdotes provided insight into everyday life, social interaction, and human psychology. Across these diverse forms, recurring motifs—heroism, loyalty, fate, generosity, conflict, and moral judgment—demonstrate the central concerns of pre-Islamic Arab society and the

narrative strategies employed to communicate them. These patterns not only facilitated audience engagement but also ensured continuity and coherence within the oral tradition, allowing stories to be remembered, transmitted, and adapted over generations.

In examining pre-Islamic narratives, it is also clear that their impact extended beyond their immediate cultural context. They laid the foundation for subsequent Arabic literature, influencing the evolution of narrative forms, techniques, and thematic concerns throughout Islamic and post-Islamic literary history. The sophistication of storytelling, the richness of character portrayal, and the blending of historical reality with imaginative elaboration provided a model for later literary development. These narratives exemplify how literature can function simultaneously as an artistic expression, a repository of knowledge, and a vehicle for cultural continuity.

Finally, the study of pre-Islamic narrative discourse underscores the enduring human fascination with stories and their role in shaping identity, consciousness, and values. These narratives reveal the ways in which humans have historically used storytelling to make sense of their world, articulate their experiences, and convey lessons across generations. They demonstrate that narrative is not merely a reflection of reality but a tool for interpreting, understanding, and transforming

it. The pre-Islamic Arabs, through their stories, achieved a synthesis of art, history, ethics, and imagination, producing a literary tradition that continues to resonate today.

In conclusion, pre-Islamic narrative discourse represents a remarkable convergence of literary artistry, cultural expression, and social function. Its structures, themes, and patterns illuminate the human experience in early Arab society, while its aesthetic and ethical dimensions highlight the sophistication and enduring significance of Arabic storytelling. By reading and analyzing these narratives, we gain not only a deeper appreciation of their artistic and cultural value but also insight into the collective imagination, moral concerns, and social realities of the pre-Islamic Arab world. The narratives' simplicity, clarity, and symbolic power ensure their continued relevance, demonstrating that the art of storytelling is both timeless and universal, connecting past and present through the enduring appeal of human experience.

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