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## The Desert and the Sa'alik: The Creation of Identity in Pre-Islamic Arabia

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## INTRODUCTION

The *sa'alik* (singular *su'luk*) were the vagabond poets of Pre-Islamic Arabia who roamed the desert in isolation. Deprived of the security and structure of a tribe, they braved the hardships of their arid environment and composed poetry that immortalized their lifestyle as one of staunch self-sufficiency and social deviance. As occupants of society's fringes, they learned to find meaning in desolation and survive on the harsh desert sands without the comfort of civilization. In doing so, it seems that the *sa'alik* were able to fill this absence with the ecology of the desert and tie their identity to its demands. Instead of finding warmth and connection within human settlements, they found brethren and belonging amongst the beasts underneath the luminous stars. This paper will focus on the role their surrounding environment played in motivating their transition into true vagabonds by analyzing the poetry of al-Shanfara and Ta'abbata Sharran, whose works display the subversive nature of the *sa'alik* psyche and what it took to live in the wild. Through my exploration of their writings, it becomes apparent that desert imagery plays a critical role in cultivating the *sa'alik*'s isolation from society and closeness with nature.

## DESERT IN THE ARABIAN IMAGINATION

With craggy mountains and shifting dunes that stretch into the horizon, the Arabian desert is a formidable environment that supports little life. Because of this harsh topography, surviving in the desert was a continuous struggle for nomadic tribesmen. According to Dr. William Norton's article "The Influence of the Desert on Early Islam," it is from this brutality that a certain fatalism is believed to have been impressed onto the Arabian consciousness. He writes that "in the presence of the water hole gone dry, or the descending cloud of locusts, man is overwhelmed by a sense of the utter uselessness of struggle with an unrelenting and inescapable fate."<sup>1</sup> With scarcely any resources available to him, man is able to glean little hope from such a merciless landscape. Facing the difficulty of such an uncompromising reality, it is understandable that Fate was viewed as an entity that evaded mortal control. Instead, it was something that dictated both the suffering and the obstacles man faced in his lifetime. Indeed, Norton goes on to deduce that surviving in the midst of hopelessness promotes a grit that "fosters the self-regarding, the anti-social virtues," arguing that the desert man "cannot trust, he cannot co-operate, he cannot cohere in any permanent organization of which mutual faith is the essential cement."<sup>2</sup> If one adopts this perspective, it can be interpreted that trust, and the dependence that is forged from this interpersonal link, may have been viewed as a weakness in such a cutthroat environment. Even within nomadic societies of the Middle East, the prevalence of annual food shortages often led to a "'sociology of hoarding' in which food stores were hidden or denied to all but the closest kin," despite generosity and hospitality "constituting an important aspect of *mur'u*a (manliness) and *'ird* (honor)."<sup>3</sup> Thus, the pressures of the desert often led to a dismissal of prominent social values in exchange for a chance of survival.

Robert Irwin's definition from his seminal *Night and Horses and the Desert: An Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature* can help situate the *sa'alik*'s role in the desert: "The *sa'alik* poets were restless outlaws, who had been cast out from their tribes. They were fiercely independent, often misanthropic, and they produced bleak, misanthropic odes about violence and

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<sup>1</sup> William Harmon Norton, "The Influence of the Desert on Early Islam," *The Journal of Religion* 4, no. 4 (1924): 383-396.

<sup>2</sup> Norton, 389.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan A.C. Brown, "The Social Context of Pre-Islamic Poetry: Poetic Imagery and Social Reality in the Mu'allaqat," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (2003): 29-50.

hardship.”<sup>4</sup> From this explanation, it is fathomable that the persona of the vagabond poet was forged in part from his surroundings, as he embodies a more radical form of self-sufficiency in response to deprivation that was already a necessity of desert living. No longer a supplicant for the desert’s mercy, the independent *sa’alik* take a more proactive approach to survival.

*LAMIYATT AL-ARAB* BY AL-SHANFARA

This theme of independence can be further explored by examining elements of al-Shanfara’s sixth-century *Lamiyatt al-Arab*. Regarded as perhaps the most famous example of *sa’alik* poetry, the encircling presence of the desert runs through it as the poet’s unceasing backdrop. In describing his environment, al-Shanfara explains in line 3:

In this land is a refuge for a man  
from wrongs,  
for one fearing scalding hatred,  
a place to withdraw.<sup>5</sup>

Already the desert is established as a sanctuary for the *su’luk*, who wishes to distance himself from the “wrongs” he had accumulated in his past life as a member of society. His personal characterization as one who “[fears] scalding hatred” is interesting because it situates himself as the recipient of this severe response without explaining what may have warranted it. This could be interpreted as an intentional design to portray the *su’luk* as a victim of an unjust tribal system that left him no choice but to leave. In this context, the desert presents itself as a haven in which protection from these pitfalls of socialization can be sought.

In his denial of the community that humanity provides, al-Shanfara finds substitutes in creatures of the desert. The reconstruction of family in such a competitive and dangerous ecosystem emphasizes the *su’luk’s* ability to simultaneously reject social constructs and assimilate into the wilderness of the desert. Directly addressing the tribesmen he had left behind, al-Shanfara writes in line 5:

I have in place of you other kin:  
the wolf, unwearying runner,  
the darting sand leopard,  
the bristle-necked hyena.<sup>6</sup>

By finding brotherhood in beasts that terrorize humans, the *su’luk* demonstrates his commitment to renouncing the civility he once knew. This shift to the savage and perhaps misunderstood status of these animals marks the strengthening of his identity’s tie to the desert while also underscoring the power of the desert itself in shaping the characters of those who brave its conditions. The wolf, leopard, and hyena are totems of qualities that thrive in the desert’s narrow ecological niche. By listing features such as the wolf’s endurance and the leopard’s speed, al-Shanfara implies that not only does he himself have the capability to survive, but he can also

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Irwin, *Night & Horses & The Desert: An Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature* (Anchor Books, 2002), 23.

<sup>5</sup> al-Shanfara, *Lamiyatt al-Arab*, in *In Desert Tracings: Six Classic Arabian Odes*, translated by Michael A. Sells, (Wesleyan University Press, 1989). All further quotations are from this same translation.

<sup>6</sup> al-Shanfara, 24.

become a dominant force to be reckoned with, just like his allies. This reclamation and subsequent transformation of identity reveals how the *su'luk* seeks to break free from the limitations of society by integrating himself into that of the desert. Although he has been outcasted from the tribe, a meaningful role as a prowler awaits him.

In roaming the sands like its many beasts, the *su'luk* exposes and acclimates himself to the challenges the desert presents to those who wander in solitude. For example, its expansiveness can become oppressive as its vast stretches of seemingly identical landscapes begin to press in on those seeking passage through them. Despite the potent dread that this sheer space could inspire, the *su'luk* proclaims that he is neither idle:

Nor bewildered by the dark  
when the towering emptiness  
turns astray the traveler, lagging,  
Frantic, losing his way.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike those who would balk at this disorientation, al-Shanfara expresses his unwavering resolve and bravery by extolling his capability to navigate this “towering emptiness” by way of his own wits. Whereas the traveler has been coddled by the help and guidance of others, the *su'luk* demonstrates great fortitude in embracing the bareness of his environment. In this gulf of desolation, he can eke out his own path without falling victim to the very mortal panic and anxiety that arises in those who allow their fear of the alien to control them. In fact, it could be interpreted that his lack of unease translates into comfort in the uncanny, for the *su'luk* finds his own world in what others regard as otherworldly and deceptive. Through these lines, al-Shanfara attempts to convey how the *su'luk* traverses the chasm between society and nature to join the side of the feral and inhuman. Unlike the socialized man, who recognizes that he is out of place in barrenness, the *su'luk*, in his rejection of the tribe, becomes a true creature of the desert.

Hunger is a fact of life in such a severe environment, and one can imagine how living alone without the resource network of a tribe could exacerbate this discomfort. In describing his experience, al-Shanfara seems to argue that hunger to the point of emaciation is a driving force in the development of a spurned, misanthropic identity:

But this hard soul  
gives me no rest  
when wronged  
until I move on,

Wrapping my insides  
around an empty stomach pit,  
like a weaver's threads  
spun and twisted.<sup>8</sup>

To the *su'luk*, hunger is a force to be mastered. His analogy of a weaver's threads to convey his body's methodical efforts to persevere despite malnourishment shows how this mitigation is an act of discipline. In “Archetype and Attribution in Early Arabic Poetry: al-Shanfara and the

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<sup>7</sup> al-Shanfara, 25.

<sup>8</sup> al-Shanfara, 26.

Lamiyyat al-Arab,” author Suzanne Stetkevych posits that this theme of battling intense hunger becomes “a cultivated art of acquired skill, like rope-making - an intentional, obsessive, and, the poet would have us believe, freely chosen occupation. With an ironic twist, the image of the rope-maker produces an antithesis curiously appropriate to the *su’luk*’s liminal status: The goal of society is to provide satiety, whereas the *su’luk* cultivates the art of starvation.”<sup>9</sup> In her analysis of the *Lamiyyat al-Arab*, Stetkevych deduces that the *su’luk* is perpetually caught in a transitional state between rejection of society and reintegration, and this standing allows them to lead lives of danger and isolation. When it comes to dealing with the inevitable hunger that arises from this isolation, Stetkevych argues that the *su’luk* embraces and nurtures his relationship with it instead of pushing it away. By meditating on his pain, he can begin to exert control over it, much like a rope-maker spinning his threads. In this way, the *su’luk* internalizes his struggle for existence and turns it into an exercise of self-reliance and will. From these lines, Stetkevych draws the conclusion that while society provides nourishment, both physically and socially, the isolation of the *su’luk* grounds itself in deprivation.

Adopting this perspective, it seems that the *su’luk* cannot exist without a lack of human contact and comfort. In the interests of this paper’s focus on the role of the desert in this dynamic, it can be concluded that the desert presents itself as the perfect environment to sustain such an identity of solitary perseverance, for it invariably demands endurance or death. It should also be noted that images of hunger and emaciation evoke the rawness and brutality of the natural order of the animal world. This plays into the notion of deprivation serving as a nexus between the *su’luk* and the desert’s ecology, further reinforcing his distance from society and closeness with nature.

#### *HOW I MET THE GHUL* BY TA’ABBATA SHARRAN

Besides the physical challenges of the desert, the presence of the supernatural also posed a threat to the *su’luk*’s survival in his unforgiving environment. Indeed, perhaps the opportunity for encounters with the fearsome and unfathomable helped deepen the rift between the *su’luk* and his tribal community, as in order to survive he had to reckon with dangers rarely seen by humans. Ta’abbata Sharran is another notable *su’luk* whose work can be explored in order to pull apart this idea. In his poem *How I Met the Ghul*, the fierce *su’luk* is attacked by a ghul, an entity that traditionally takes the form of an ugly female demon, who descends upon him in enemy territory.

O who will bear my news to the young men of Fahm  
of what I met at Riha Bitan?  
Of how I met the ghul swooping down  
on the desert bare and flat as a sheet.  
I said to her, ‘We are both worn with exhaustion,  
brothers of travel, so leave my place to me!’  
She sprang at me; then my hand raised  
against her a polished Yemeni blade  
Then undismayed I struck her: she fell flat.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, "Archetype and Attribution in Early Arabic Poetry: al-Shanfara and the Lamiyyat al-Arab," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 18, no. 3 (1986): 361-390.

<sup>10</sup> Irwin, 27.

The *su'luk* must defend himself against the ghul and stabs her “undismayed,” meaning that he has maintained a level of composure and cool precision during this intense exchange. Instead of falling victim to her sudden assault, he holds his ground and shows his mettle by attempting to reason with her. His reference to her as a fellow “[brother] of travel” alludes to a certain shared status between them; they are both entities of the desert who operate alone and are to be feared in the eyes of the average man. It can be interpreted that he resultantly expects to receive a degree of respect from her, for he is no feeble traveler.

Despite the ghul’s conventional depiction as a feminine shapeshifter who lures travelers from their path to their death, scholarly opinion has grown regarding the ghul as a metaphor for the desert’s hazards. According to Suzanne Stetkevych in her article “The Su'luk and His Poem: A Paradigm of Passage Manque,” the famous lexicographer Ibn Manzur found the etymology of the word “ghul” to be rooted in the meaning “the land made him perish and led him astray.”<sup>11</sup> It follows logically that the “perpetual shifting and changing of the wayless desert is thus personified in the constantly changing ghul that waylays and kills the night-traveler.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the ghul can be interpreted as a manifestation of the horror one experiences when lost and dying in the desert; she embodies the desert’s very real ability to excruciatingly strip away human life.

This view is corroborated by Ahmed Al-Rawi in “The Mythical Ghoul in Arabic Culture,” where he notes that the rise of rationalist thought in the Islamic faith caused many scholars, such as al-Jahiz, to provide an explanation for the mythos surrounding the existence of the ghoul: “the desert heat and fear caused by darkness and loneliness could make any man hallucinate and see illusions.”<sup>13</sup> Confronted with the perils of such an environment, the *su'luk* does not surrender. Rather, he declares:

I lay upon her through the night  
that in the morning I might see what had come to me.  
Behold! Two eyes set in a hideous head,  
like the head of a cat, split-tongued.<sup>14</sup>

It is written that Ta'abbata Sharran lays upon the slain ghul’s body through the night instead of simply going on his way so that he can witness the ghastliness of her true form in the light. This act reveals that the *su'luk* possesses grit and tenacity that could only be born from his disconnect from society and intimacy with the nature of the desert. After having to defend his livelihood against the desert’s unique threats, he is able to effectively tackle and vanquish his own fears of the unknown through his slaying of the ghul. This overt violence reinforces his prevailing role in the desert’s hierarchy, as his display of dominance distinguishes him from the average man who would not have shown such nerve. Therefore, the metaphorical ghul serves as another example of the *su'luk*’s mastery over the desert’s hardships, which results from his evolution into a rancorous wanderer.

## CONCLUSION

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<sup>11</sup> Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, “The Su'luk and His Poem: A Paradigm of Passage Manque,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 104, no. 4 (1984): 661-678

<sup>12</sup> Stetkevych, 667.

<sup>13</sup> Ahmed Al-Rawi, “The Mystical Ghoul in Arabic Culture,” *Cultural Analysis* 8 (2009): 45-69.

<sup>14</sup> Irwin, 23-27.

The *su'luk's* identity as a social deviant allows him to nurture a deep personal tie to his environment, for that is all he has without the structure of a tribe. The desert is both a sanctuary and a den of terror: it holds the potential to provide him with kin after being rejected by his human peers, as in the *Lamiyyat al-Arab*, and to threaten his life, as depicted by the hostile ghul in *How I Met the Ghul*. Underlying this dynamic of providing and deprivation is the constant personal battle he must wage in order to endure under punishing conditions. However, the *su'luk's* driftless nature is able to make this space of blistering struggle a home. His identity as a vagabond is complex in that it is inextricably linked to his sense of belonging in the desert environment. It is clear that the identities of both the *su'luk* and the desert are similarly ruthless and cold-blooded, providing an opportunity for mutual benefit. Despite being an environment characterized by its adversity, the works of al-Shanfara and Ta'abbata Sharran demonstrate how the desert nourishes the *sa'alik*.

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