

## Abû Al-'Alâ' Al-Ma'Arrî: His Contribution To Arabic Poetry

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Abû al-'Alâ' al-Ma'arrî (d. 1057 A.D.), one of the most remarkable blind poets, is celebrated as a brilliant and influential figure in Arabic literature, especially during the Abbasid era. This period marked a pivotal shift in Arab society, transitioning from a nomadic way of life to a more urban and cultured existence. Alongside these societal changes, the landscape of Arabic poetry also experienced a transformation. Traditional Arabian verse, known for its elaborate and intricate meters, began to evolve into shorter, more flexible forms. Al-Ma'arrî's poetic brilliance lies in his mastery of these diverse styles, which often convey themes of deep scepticism and pessimism. Despite this underlying tone of cynicism, his work transcends the limitations of his time, earning him a lasting place in the canon of Arabic literature. His distinct perspective and literary innovation have not only secured his enduring influence in the Arab world but have also garnered significant recognition from Western scholars, making him a revered figure whose poetry continues to inspire admiration today.

**Keywords:** Al-Ma'arrî, Abbasids, literature, poetry, pessimism, Arab scholars, etc.

### Introduction:

Abû al-'Alâ' al-Ma'arrî (973–1057 A.D.), a renowned blind poet and philosopher, holds a significant place in Arabic literature. Raised in an educated family, he displayed his poetic talent early and sought further learning in Baghdad. Over time, he became one of the most notable Arab philosophers and poets of his era. Al-Ma'arrî's works marked a departure from the established cultural norms, using poetry to reflect on his life experiences and deep philosophical thoughts. In a time dominated by ignorance and superstition, his poetry elevated

the literary landscape, challenging societal conventions and influencing the intellectual discourse of his age.<sup>1</sup>

Abû al-‘Alâ’ al-Ma‘arrî’s poetic journey can be divided into two stages:

1. Pre-isolation stage: This phase spanned his early years until he returned from Baghdad at 37. His poetry during this time adhered to traditional themes like *Madîh* (praise), *Ghazal* (love poetry), and *Rithâ’* (lamentation), as seen in his collection *Saqṭ al-Zand* (The Zand Falls). His work in this period was heavily influenced by al-Mutanabbî’s poetic style.
2. Post-isolation stage: During this phase, reflected in his collection *al-Luzûmiyyât*, al-Ma‘arrî’s poetry shifted to philosophical themes, focusing on the universe, human life, and destiny, devoid of the traditional purposes of poetry. His isolation and asceticism deeply influenced this later work.<sup>2</sup>

Abû al-‘Alâ’ al-Ma‘arrî’s poetry collections reflect his diverse themes and evolving style:

1. *Istagfar wa Istagfarî* (Ask for Forgiveness and Seek Forgiveness): Comprising around 10,000 verses, this collection focuses on themes of forgiveness and redemption, offering deep reflections on these subjects.
2. *Al-Ghâz* (Puzzles): This collection features thought-provoking and enigmatic poems, encouraging contemplation and intellectual engagement.
3. *Jâmi’ al-Awzân* (Collection of Measures): A collection of 9,000 lines dedicated to riddles, showcasing al-Ma‘arrî’s skill in wordplay and poetic puzzles.
4. *Saqṭ al-Zand* (Fall of the Stick of a Fire Drill): Written during the early stage of his career, this collection highlights his developing poetic talent and serves as a testament to his emerging brilliance.
5. *Luzûm mâ lâ yalzam* (The Necessity of What Is Not Necessary): A distinctive collection, meticulously organized according to the Arabic alphabet, where al-Ma‘arrî experiments with changing rhyme letters without losing harmony. This work demonstrates his mastery of phonetics and challenges traditional poetic conventions.

These collections exemplify al-Ma'arrî's creative depth and evolution as a poet.<sup>3</sup>

Nabil al-Haidarî <sup>4</sup> noted that Abû al-'Alâ' al-Ma'arrî, a poet and philosopher, combined literature, philosophy, heritage, controversy, and science, gaining expertise in astrology that astonished his contemporaries, who acknowledged his genius. After being examined in Baghdad, he earned the title "the wonder of his time." His fame transcended borders, and Orientalists also admired his intellect and philosophy, with works like al-Luzûmiyyât being translated into multiple languages.

Al-Haidarî further mentioned that due to his beliefs, al-Ma'arrî was forced to leave Aleppo. His presence there sparked many literary, philosophical, and intellectual debates. Baghdad, as Taha Hussain observed, was like "today's Paris," attracting students from all over the Islamic world. Al-Ma'arrî attended various intellectual gatherings in Baghdad, engaging in fearless discussions with writers and philosophers. However, conflicts with jurists forced him to return to his hometown, Ma'arra al-Numan, where he lived in isolation. Despite this, he deeply regretted leaving Baghdad and longed to spend his final days there.

Al-Ma'arrî's poetry exemplifies the elegance and eloquence of Arabic literature, covering themes like praise, wisdom, pride, and lamentation. Significant works from this period include al-Luzûmiyyât, Saqṭ al-Zand, and Risâlah al-Ghufrân (The Epistle of Forgiveness).<sup>5</sup>

#### **Description:**

#### **Abû al-'Alâ al-Ma'arrî: His Life and Death**

Abû al-'Alâ' Ahmad ibn 'Abd Allah al-Ma'arrî was born in 973 A.D. in Ma'arra, near Aleppo. At four, he contracted smallpox, resulting in blindness, a condition he lived with for the rest of his life. He also lost his father early on and only began serious studies at fourteen. Driven by a passion for knowledge, al-Ma'arrî traveled to places like Aleppo and Antioch, memorizing numerous manuscripts and attending lectures by prominent scholars. His exceptional intellect and memory stood out, and he returned to Ma'arra in 993 A.D. after completing his studies.<sup>6</sup>

Abû al-‘Alâ’ Ahmad, from the Tanukh tribe of Yemen, was the son of Qâḍî (Judge) ‘Abd Allah. He lost vision in his left eye, and his right eye turned white, allowing him to see only the color red. Despite these challenges, he excelled in studying Arabic language and literature, surpassing his teachers. At twenty, he began teaching, demonstrating unmatched mastery. In 1002 A.D., he left al-Ma‘arra for Syria, studying ancient and contemporary works. He later travelled to Baghdad, seeking to study Greek and Indian philosophy, where his intellectual influence grew through regular discussions with scholars and philosophers.<sup>7</sup>

‘Abd al-Salâm, who oversaw a major library, hosted gatherings of free-thinkers every Friday, where Abû al-‘Alâ’ al-Ma‘arrî became a regular member. This group included rationalists and materialists, significantly influencing his philosophical views. After spending one year and seven months in Baghdad, Abû al-‘Alâ’ was called back to Ma‘arra due to his mother's illness, only to find she had already passed away. Devastated, he expressed his grief in poetry and chose never to leave his hometown again.<sup>8</sup>

From that point onward, he withdrew from social interactions, engaging only with his students. Embracing a solitary lifestyle, he dedicated himself to teaching and documenting the deeper meanings of existence—elements beyond the understanding of animals and creation. His diet was simple, consisting of legumes and figs, supplemented by an annual stipend of thirty dinars. His clothing and bedding were modest, made from rough cotton and a cold mattress.

Choosing not to marry, he aimed to protect any potential offspring from societal challenges and hardships. He remained a bachelor until he died in 1057 AD, having lived for eighty-four years. His final wish was for a specific verse to be inscribed on his tombstone.

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

After his passing and burial, around eighty distinguished individuals and a hundred learned scholars—experts in jurisprudence, traditions of the Prophet (peace be upon him), and respected Sufi saints—convened near his gravesite.<sup>9</sup>

**His credits in versification:**

Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī’s contributions to Arabic literature are highly significant. His contemporary context was marked by political and moral corruption, wealth disparities, and religious divisions, making public life quite challenging. Similarly, his private life was not much better, as it was filled with misfortunes, family revelations, and travels that exposed him to various cities.

Al-Ma‘arrī was known for his sharp intellect, profound insight, and refined taste, which significantly shaped his literary legacy. He was both a genius poet and a prose writer. Although he produced a vast amount of poetry throughout his life, much has been lost over time. He began his poetic journey at the age of eleven and continued for over eighty years. Given this lengthy career, it's likely he created a considerable body of work, even if many themes are now obscure.

For example, he referenced a work titled *Istagfar wa Istagfari* (Ask for Forgiveness and Seek Forgiveness), which allegedly contained ten thousand verses, but only its title remains known. According to Nasirī Khusraw’s travelogue, in 1046 AD, he composed eleven hundred verses of poetry, just a decade before his death. While it's probable he wrote more after this, only a small fraction of his output has survived.<sup>10</sup>

### **His Anthology of Arabic Poetry:**

Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī’s Arabic poetry includes three main collections. The first, *Saqṭ al-Zand* (The Fall of the Fire Stick), features poems from both his youth and later years. Notably, a poem called "Al-Ta‘iyya," sent to Baghdad's Dār al-‘Ilm treasurer, dates to 1023 AD, suggesting some poems in this collection were written later than his youth. Al-Ma‘arrī indicated that *Saqṭ al-Zand* included youthful works but likely compiled and updated it after 1048 AD.

The second collection, *al-Dir‘iyāt*, focuses on shield descriptions. Published in Egypt and added to *Saqṭ al-Zand*, its emphasis on armour might reflect al-Ma‘arrī’s detailed knowledge or personal significance, though more context is needed to understand why this became a prominent theme later in his life.

The third, *al-Luzūmiyāt*, is the largest and most significant, reflecting al-Ma‘arrī’s later life and offering deep insights into his thoughts and character. Further sections will explore each collection and assess al-Ma‘arrī’s impact on poetry.<sup>11</sup>

## **Al-Ma'arrī's Poetical Works:**

### **The Saqṭ al-Zand:**

This collection, which includes praise-filled poems, often follows the traditional three-part structure of the classical qasīda: nasīb, rahīl, and madīḥ. However, the poet sometimes deviates from this structure, even omitting the nasīb entirely. This approach contrasts with Abū Nuwās, who rejects the nasīb in favour of wine imagery.

Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī, being ascetic, disapproves of wine, preferring water. When he includes the nasīb, he often emphasizes its elegiac quality by depicting cooing turtle doves, which symbolize his yearning for a distant beloved. As a blind poet, he sometimes requests his fellow travellers to trace a flash of lightning or perceive illusions of his beloved in dreams.

The rahīl section in his qasīdas is detailed, describing weary camels, mirages, and desert fauna like antelopes and chameleons. His detailed descriptions of the night are thought to be connected to his blindness. The evolution of these descriptions will be discussed further.

Abū al-'Alā' shows limited interest in the independent ghazal form, treating it more as a technical exercise. The madīḥ often includes exaggerated praise, which he later regretted, believing such praise should be reserved for God alone.

In Saqṭ al-Zand, Abū al-'Alā' includes elegies for the deceased and ornate poetry with elaborate figures of speech and wordplay. A notable subset of 31 poems, titled Dir'iyāt (Armour Poems), describes suits of armour and often omits traditional qasīda themes, featuring dialogues about the armour.<sup>12</sup>

### **Luzūm mā lā yalzam:**

The Luzūm mā lā yalzam, a second collection of poetry by Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī, was written after his time in Baghdad. Unlike Saqṭ al-Zand, this collection did not achieve widespread popularity in the Muslim world due to its unconventional form and content. The title translates to "Committing oneself to what is not obligatory," referring to a unique rhyme scheme where Abū al-'Alā' employed double-rhyme, innovating

traditional rhyming rules. This method later became known as *iltizām* in Arabic literary theory.

In the Preface, Abū al-‘Alā’ described the *Luzūm* as a glorification of God, intended as a reminder of the negligent and a caution against worldly mockery. He expressed a reluctance to follow conventional themes, criticizing poets who embellish their works with falsehoods, such as exaggerations about beloved ones in ghazals and descriptions of desert hardships. Abū al-‘Alā’ asserted that his poetry sought truth and piety, making it incompatible with traditional poetry, which he deemed weak.

While he did not present the *Luzūm* as a systematic philosophical treatise, it includes views that sometimes diverge from orthodox Islamic beliefs. Although he identified as a monotheist, he questioned certain tenets, including resurrection, favouring reason as a guide in life. Some historians doubted his orthodoxy, citing a dream of him being tormented by vipers, interpreted as a sign of heresy.

Conversely, biographers like Ibn al-‘Adīm defended him against accusations of unorthodoxy, researching his life and engaging with his contemporaries' descendants for insight.

In the West, *Luzūmiyyāt* gained recognition, especially during Abū al-‘Alā’'s later years when the *Faṭimids* controlled northern Syria, which he hinted at in some verses. Scholar Ṭaha Ḥusayn analyzed the poet's philosophical ideas within the *Luzūm*, and many of its quotations appear in a psychologically focused biography by ‘Ā’isha ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, known as *Bint al-Shāṭī*.<sup>13</sup>

### **Malqā al-Sabīl (Tales from the Road):**

This concise work has become a significant part of Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī's literary legacy, ensuring its lasting recognition alongside his poetry. It reportedly received a warm welcome in the Muslim West, inspiring many attempts at emulation (*mu‘ārada*). Notably, titles and excerpts from these emulations are documented in Ḥasan Ḥusnī ‘Abd al-Waḥḥāb's *Mu‘ārada al-Maghārība li-Malqā al-Sabīl*, a valuable resource referenced in *Ta‘rīf*.

The work *Malqā al-Sabīl* consists of short paragraphs that skilfully combine rhymed prose with poetic lines. Each rhymed prose paragraph aligns with its subsequent poetic

counterpart, ensuring thematic continuity. The contents remain deeply rooted in orthodox values, showing no deviation from established moral and literary traditions.

Some scholars have observed similarities to the eloquent speeches of pre-Islamic figures like Quss ibn Şā'ida in this work. Additionally, 'Abd al-Wahhāb suggests that Malqā al-Sabīl may reflect the poet's later years and a return to his foundational religious beliefs.<sup>14</sup>

#### **His Type of Poetry:**

Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī lived an ordinary life, yet he gained rich experiences through various challenges. Despite adversities, he learned valuable lessons that illuminated his presence in the Arab intellectual scene. His travels across different cities exposed him to diverse environments, greatly shaping his literary works in both prose and poetry.

Identifying as a poet, al-Ma'arrī left a lasting impact on Arabic literature. He lost his sight at the age of four, but this did not hinder his prolific writing. He began composing poetry at eleven and continued for over eighty years, reflecting his deep commitment to the art.

Throughout his life, he wrote many poems, including a significant work titled *Istagfir wa Istagfirī*, which contained ten thousand couplets. Unfortunately, this book is now lost, existing only by name. Notably, Nasirī Khasru recorded that al-Ma'arrī wrote an astonishing one hundred thousand couplets, an estimate made a decade before his death. His unwavering dedication to poetry solidified his status as a prominent figure in Arabic literature.<sup>15</sup>

Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī had an exceptional memory, enabling him to effortlessly memorize what he learned. Known for his sharp wit and humour, his poetry exhibited unique qualities, often described as a blend of concealment and clarity, reminiscent of Sufi teachings.

He explored themes such as wine, humour, hunting, and satire through selective odes on elegy, eulogy, and pride. His early works featured exaggeration and unconventional language, occasionally disregarding grammatical norms. Participation in poetic competitions enriched his literary style, incorporating unusual vocabulary and scientific terms.



As he matured, al-Ma'arrī's poetry became more restrained, moving away from the styles of earlier Arab poets. Influenced by Bedouin tradition, he used pure language and complex meters, enhancing the beauty and musicality of his work. He gained a prominent status in Arabic poetry and philosophy, often regarded as second only to al-Mutanabbī, with his distinctive style and deep insights celebrated by his contemporaries.<sup>16</sup>

Abu'l-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī's poetry is preserved in three significant collections within Arabic literature. The first, *Siqṭ al-Zand*, features poems from various periods of his life while he was in Baghdad and was compiled after his return to al-Ma'arra, likely including additional notable works.

The second collection, *al-Dir'iyāt*, is a smaller *dīwān* focused on plate armour, published alongside *Siqṭ al-Zand* in Egypt. All poems in this collection revolve around themes of weaponry and war, composed during the later phase of his life.

The third and largest collection is *al-Luzūmiyyāt*, which also features works from this same phase. This collection offers profound insights into al-Ma'arrī's intellect, emotions, and behaviour, providing a comprehensive understanding of his life and thoughts.<sup>17</sup>

#### **Peculiarities in the poetry of Abū al-'Alā' Al-Ma'arrī:**

Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī's poetry is notable for several key characteristics that enhance its uniqueness:

1. **Mastery of Language:** Al-Ma'arrī exhibited exceptional command over the Arabic language, employing unique structures and a distinct style.
2. **Broad Linguistic Culture:** His deep understanding of the nuances of Arabic allowed him to skilfully convey thoughts and emotions.
3. **Use of Uncommon Words:** He frequently incorporated rare words into his work, exemplified by lines such as, "And death is a comfort for a person, his heart has been damaged by a disease of exhaustion."
4. **Varied Style:** His poetic style ranged from simple and clear to complex, marked by strength and distinctiveness.

5. Stylistic Strength: Al-Ma'arrī's powerful style effectively communicated his ideas, as seen in verses like, "Those of virtue, in their homelands, are strangers, alienated by their relatives."

6. Elegance in Composition: His work displayed precision and elegance, using various stylistic techniques to express ideas.

7. Attention to Rhyme: He carefully crafted rhyme schemes, enhancing the musical quality of his poetry.

8. Acute Musical Sense: Al-Ma'arrī had a refined sense of auditory aesthetics, often employing musical fragmentation in his verses.

Overall, his profound linguistic knowledge, skillful manipulation of language, and attention to style and sound contribute to the distinctiveness of his poetry in Arabic literature.<sup>18</sup>

#### **Poetical Expression of Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī:**

Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī enhanced his literary work through a vast vocabulary derived from the Arabic language. His proficiency in both prose and poetry was supported by his strong memory, extensive reading, and deep knowledge of grammar and morphology. His broad linguistic culture was evident in his poetry, reflecting his keen interest in the language's nuances and rhetorical methods. This expertise is particularly apparent in his collection *Siqṭ al-Zand*, noted for its rich meanings, elegant vocabulary, strong structures, and effective use of language. Al-Ma'arrī's style was also influenced by Bedouin traditions.<sup>19</sup>

Although Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī was raised in an urban environment, he often used Bedouin vocabulary in his poetry. Influenced by pre-Islamic and ancient poets, he emulated their distinctive style to create rich meanings and vivid imagery. His works frequently included references to camels, mounts, and symbols like swords and shields, which served as powerful analogies for life and death themes.<sup>20</sup>

#### **Criticism:**

According to Professor R.A. Nicholson, Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī's early odes in *Siqṭ al-Zand* were composed before he turned thirty-five and show the influence of Mutanabbī. *Siqṭ al-Zand* has gained more popularity in the East compared to al-

Ma'arrī's *al-Luzūmiyyāt*, which is less favoured due to its controversial opinions and unconventional style.

Al-Ma'arrī is often viewed as a sceptical thinker who questioned his beliefs and critiqued religious superstitions. His perspective is described as pessimistic, with a belief that religion was a human invention used to manipulate the masses. He rejected various Islamic practices, including the Hajj and the ritual of kissing the Black Stone, viewing them as myths.

Some scholars argue that al-Ma'arrī rejected divine revelation in favour of reason and virtue. His pessimism extended to recommending against having children to avoid the suffering of life, as reflected in his elegy contemplating the transient nature of existence.<sup>21</sup>

Scholars offer various views on Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī's beliefs. Some suggest he maintained core Islamic principles, such as acknowledging God's perfection while rejecting imperfection. Aisha 'Abd al-Rahman notes that despite criticisms, al-Ma'arrī's work largely focused on asceticism, sermons, and praising God, with those close to him attesting to his strong faith.

Dr. Taha Hussein observes that al-Ma'arrī believed in a wise Creator but struggled with understanding the Creator's actions, leading to inner conflict. Al-Ma'arrī himself spoke of a sincere belief in an unseen God, emphasizing worship and avoiding wrongdoing, though his quest for understanding led to a complex worldview.

Shawqī Ḍaif clarifies that al-Ma'arrī's critiques targeted the followers of religions, not the religions themselves. His criticisms were directed at the perceived intellectual deficiencies of people adhering to various doctrines, including Ismaili-Fatimi, Shiite sects, Nusayris, and Sufis. His focus was on critiquing the intellectual state of his contemporaries rather than the religions per se.<sup>22</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī is a prominent figure in poetry, philosophy, and ethics, with his three main anthologies—*Siqṭ al-Zand*, *al-Dir'iyyāt*, and *al-Luzūmiyyāt*—offering distinct insights into his literary and philosophical perspectives. Al-Ma'arrī is noted for his original thinking and poetry, characterized by depth and creativity. His *Luzūmiyyāt*

showcases his expertise in Arabic, with intricate wordplay and vivid imagery. Siqṭ al-Zand features a range of themes, including panegyric, love, and elegy, reflecting his versatility. Overall, al-Ma'arrī's works are celebrated for their profound impact and enduring significance in Arabic literature and philosophy.

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