THEMES AND STYLES IN SOME SELECTED QASIDAS: A NEW HISTORICIST STUDY

BY

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ABSTRACT

The pre Islamic Arabic ode, *Qasida* is a verse form that persisted as the prevailing Arab-Islamic poetic form from 500 A.D. to the first half of our century. It had great impact on the Arabic language, literature, rhetoric, folk traditions and poetry. This tradition has spread all over the world and has inspired poets to write panegyrics in their native languages. It has been written in Persian, Urdu, and African languages. The Muallaqat are recognized to be extraordinary during the pre-Islamic period because they are the winners of annual poetry competitions and are suspended on the walls for everyone to read; they therefore act as, and are recognized as the original form of the *Qasida*. The verse form is predominately used in literary works before now following a traditional structure, with themes and motifs related to the happenings of the social, political and economic settings of the pre-Islamic era. These poetic forms survived evolution throughout the literary world. Although some forms have emerged through literary innovations, some still imitated the earlier structure of classical *Qasida*. For instance, the *Qasida Burdah* was produced 650 years after the demise of the Prophet (saw) but still retains some of the fundamental elements from the earlier structure. This research therefore examines the changes in the themes and styles of the *Qasida* during its historical evolution between the sixth and the twentieth century using the new historical theory. It also describes the exact nature of the *Qasida* in the past six centuries to show the pattern of development in their themes and styles. The findings showed changes and varieties in the themes and styles that have emerged from the classical period to this contemporary period.

خلاصة البحث

القصيدة العربية ما قبل الإسلام هي شكل من الأشكال الشعرية التي استمرت بعدّها الشكل العربي – الإسلامي السائد من ٥٠٠م إلى النصف الأول من القرن المنصرم، وقد كان لها تأثير كبير على اللغة العربية، والأدب، والبلاغة، والتقاليد الشعبية، والشعر، وقد انتشر هذا التراث في جميع أنحاء العالم، فألهمت القصيدة العربية الشعراء غير العرب كتابة المديح بلغاتهم الأصلية، فكتبت باللغة الفارسية والأردية واللغات الأفريقية وغير ذلك. عرفت المعلقات في عصر ما قبل الإسلام بروعتها فهي تمثل المستوى الفني الأعلى للشعر في ذلك الزمن، لأنها القصائد الفائزة في الملتقى الشعري السنوي، وقد علقت هذه القصائد على الجدران ليقرأها الجميع، وعليه فإنها تعدّ الأنموذج الأصلي للقصيدة. إن شكل القصيدة المستخدم في الأعمال الأدبية في تلك المرحلة يغلب عليه اتباع البنية التقليدية في الموضوعات والأفكار المتصلة بمجريات الحياة الاجتماعية والسياسية والاقتصادية لمرحلة ما قبل العصر الإسلامي. لقد عاشت هذه الأشكال الشعرية تطورا في جميع المناحي الأدبية، وعلى الرغم من بروز بعض الأشكال الأدبية الجديدة المبتكرة، إلا أن كثيرا من الأشكال لا يزال يقلد الهيكل السابق للقصيدة الكلاسيكية، فعلى سبيل المثال، كتبت قصيدة البردة بعد وفاة النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم بنحو ٦٥٠عاما، غير أنها احتفظت بكثير من العناصر الأساسية من الهيكل السابق، وعليه فإن هذا البحث يدرس التغيرات التي طرأت على القصيدة في الموضوعات والأساليب عبر تطورها التاريخي بين القرن السادس والقرن العشرين باستخدام النظرية التاريخية الجديدة، كما أنها تصف أيضا الطبيعة الدقيقة للقصيدة في القرن السادس لإظهار أنماط التطور في موضوعاتها وأساليبها. هذا وقد أظهرت النتائج تغيرات وتنوعا في الموضوعات والأساليب التي برزت من زمن القصيدة الكلاسيكية حتى الزمن المعاصر.

APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Human Sciences in English Literary Studies.

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

Madinat Mustapha Abike

Signature**…………………………………..**   Date**…………………..**

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The pre-Islamic Arabic ode, *Qasida*, had for long been in persistent use from the Jahiliyah period to the advent of Prophet Muhammad (saw), passing through the Abbasid (661-750) and Umayyad periods (750-1258) to late twentieth century. According to Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, "the outstanding characteristics of classical Arabic poetry is the perpetuation of a single dominant poetic form, the *Qasida*, or ode, through its fifteen-hundred-year history—that is from its pre-Islamic beginnings around 500 B.C. until our own century..." (1993: 3).

Dating from the fifth century to the twentieth, the *Qasida* flourished with various themes and styles in its historical evolution. Jacobi Renate (1996) explained that poets did not strictly adhere to a particular pattern in the thematic sequence of their ode, notwithstanding, there were certain patterns preferred which indicated that a convention was formed. Renate further asserted that this convention took a gradual formation and at the end of the Jahiliyah period, the tripartite structure seemed to have been accepted among poets. Therefore, the pre-Islamic poetry gradually began to be subjected to a particular convention in both theme and style.

During the Jahiliyah period, appreciation of poetry was deemed very important and therefore, a special status was accorded to the family that possessed a poet. In "Umda of Rashiq", Qayrawan explains:

> When there appeared a poet in a family of the Arabs, the other tribes round about would gather together to that family and wish them joy of their good luck. Feasts would be got ready, the women of the tribe would join together in bands, playing upon lutes, as they were wont to

do at bridals, and the men and boys would congratulate one another; for a poet was a defence to the honour of them all, a weapon to ward off insult from their good name, and a means of perpetuating their glorious deeds and establishing their fame forever. And they used not to wish one another joy but for three things—the birth of a boy, the coming to light of a poet, and the foaling of a noble mare. (Jones, 1996: 2)

Thus, poetry was given much preference because of the social status it gave to people, especially the family of the poet. For instance, Abid bin. al-Abras acquired the gift of poetry by praying to God to help him when a member of another tribe drove him away from a watering hole with a shrewd lampoon while they tried to water their camels. In defence, he was able to give a suitable reply after acquiring the gift in order to defend the honour of his tribe. In addition, poets usually describe the distinctiveness and virtues of their tribe's way of life and happenings in their social environment. Poetry was a method of expressing their tribal history and cultural values. For instance, Zuhair ibn Abī Sulma's "*Mu'allaqa*" narrated the happenings of his social environment, which included the celebration of the end of the war of Dāhis fought between the two kindred tribes of Abs and Zubyan.

The *Qasida* does not only describe, it is composed for one of the four main purposes and these are *madih* (panegyric), *hija* (lampoon), *ghazal* (love) and *ritha* (lament) (Jones, 1992: 2). This is outlined in Ibn Qutayba's description of the specific purpose of the *Qasida*:

I have heard from a man of learning that the composer of Odes began by mentioning the desert dwelling-places and the relics and traces of habitation. Then he wept and complained and addressed the desolate encampment, and begged his companion to make a halt, in order that he might have occasion to speak of those who had once lived there and afterwards departed; …. Then to this he linked the erotic prelude (*nasīb*), and bewailed the violence of his love and the anguish of separation from his mistress and the extremity of his passion and desire, so as to win the hearts of his hearers …. Now, when the poet had assured himself of an attentive hearing, he followed up his advantage and set forth his claim: thus he went on complain of fatigue

and wanting of sleep and traveling by night and the noonday heat….
And when, after representing all the discomfort and danger of his
journey… he entered upon the panegyric (*madīh*), and incited him to
reward, and kindled his generosity by exalting him above his peers and
pronouncing the greatest dignity, in comparison with his, to be little.
(Ibn Qutayba, 1888: 14).

According to Michael Glunz (1996: 184), the *Qasida* is a poetic form that

"belong to the elegiac (*marsiya)*, panegyric (*madhiya*), the gnomic (*mauizat, hikmat*)

or didactic modes of speech, and can be used in secular as well as in religious

contexts". As it traditionally comes in the above forms, it is used either as an elegy,

panegyric, or in a gnomic way. Some of the *Qasida* combine these forms in their

compositions, while others use only one form at a time. An instance of the *Qasida*

used in a religious contest is in Ka'ab ibn Zuhair's "Poem of the Mantle"[1] and

Muhammad Al-busiriy's "*Qasida* Burdah".

 Consequently, Sperl Stefan and Christopher Shackle (1996: 2) define it based

on its formal properties as "a poem of some length with verses divided into two

hemistichs, a single metre and a monorhyme". The verse form was predominantly

used in literary works following a traditional structure with themes and motifs relating

to the social, political and economic settings of the pre-Islamic era. The structure in its

traditional form follows these three major divisions:

> The *nasib* expressing the poet's lamentation, consisting of the
> description of the abandoned encampment and of the poet's beloved
> mistress who once dwelled there; the *rahi*l, which describes the poet's
> journey through the desert and his mount, the she-camel with
> comparison of her to wild creature notably the oryx cow or bull, the
> onager, the ostrich, and the final section which may be of several
> sorts— the *fakr*, the poet's praise of himself and his tribe, including
> the hunt, the feast, combat, the drinking scene, tribal wealth, authority
> and generosity; or *madih*, court panegyric in which the praise of the
> ruler takes the place of *fakhr;* or *hija*, invective, which is in effect, an
> inverted form of *fak*r. (Stetkevych, 1993: 6-9).

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[1] Ka'ab is known as a renowned poet and one of the composers of the Mu'allaqat. He composed a
lampoon against the prophet, having heard that his brother Bujayr embraced Islam. He later composed a
poem in praise of the prophet.

During the Jahiliyah period, the *Mu'allaqat* (the suspended ones) was the best form of *Qasida*. The *Mu'allaqat* is a classical ode, a typical example, and a *chef-d'oeuvre* during the pre-Islamic periods which were recognized to be extra-ordinary because they were the winners of annual poetry competitions and were placed on the walls for everyone to read, thereby, it acted as the original form of the *Qasida*. The poets of the *Mu'allaqat* were known as Imru al-Qays, Tarafah, Zuhayr, Al- Harith, Labid, Antarah, and Amr.[2]

In addition, oral transmission was a method used in transmitting the *Qasida* which could have served as a factor in the survival of the form. During the Jahiliyah period, poets usually had *rawis*, "transmitters of poetry", whose job was mainly to communicate the poems to others in the society. Lyall acknowledges this in his statement:

> … a special apparatus existed for the perpetuation of a poet's compositions in the institution of *rawis*, or reciters. Every professed poet had his *rawi* to whom he committed his poems as he composed them, and who in his turn transmitted them to others. Many of the *rawis* were themselves poets, and many celebrated poets were also *rawis*. Imru al-Qays, man of al-Yaman and prince of Kinda, was the *rawi* of Abu Du' ad of al-Hira, and is believed to have gained from him his skill in describing the horse, in which he is reckoned a master; Zuhayr of Muzayna was the *rawi* of Aws son of Hajar of Tamin, his step-father, and al-Tufayl of Ghani both of whom he vastly eclipsed in fame. His *rawi* was Hudba, son of Khashram of Qudaa …. All these were distinguished poets as well as *rawis*, and taken together they carried the tradition of the art over nearly two centuries (Lyall, 109-110).

In line with this, the *Qasida* has passed through different phases in its historical evolution. As a result, changes are observed in themes and styles of different periods in which the *Qasida* was used. However, in order to understand and appreciate

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[2] The above lists are those mentioned by Arberry in his work *The Seven Odes* (London, 1957), pp. 228-254. Although there are variations on the list, e.g. Ibn Qutayba in his *Kitāb aš-ši'r wa-ăš-šu'arā* mentioned that Abid B. al-Abras was among the poet's of the Mu'allaqat.

the *Qasida* with regards to its transformation of style and form, its current themes and styles need to be explored.

The *Qasida* of Labid ibn Rabi'ah (560-660 A.D.) is very important for us to begin our analysis with. This is because it gives us an ideal poem that reveals the real form of the classical formal structure of the *Qasida* in terms of its themes and style. Produced in the sixth century, his *Mu'allaqah* was one of the greatest masterpieces of this poetry. The name *Mu'allaqat* came into being because the seven best poets mentioned earlier, were the winners in annual poetry competitions during the pre-Islamic period. His poem begins with the traditional structure of the *Qasida* in the following manner:

> … *nasib* that comprise of the ruined abodes (verse 1-11), followed by the departure of the women, among them the poet's inamorata, *Nawar*. The *rahil* (21-54) exhibit the description of the poet's mount, the she camel, through similes to the pregnant onager and mare and her mate (28-35) and the oryx cow bereft of her calf and pursued by hounds and hunters (36-53). The *fakr* (55-88) contains a drinking scene (57-61), a description of the poet's battle mare (63-69), the gambling over the slaughter camel and subsequent feast (73-77), to conclude with a boast about the political might of the poet's feast tribe (Stetkevych, 1993: 9).

Moving towards the seventh century and with the advent of Islam, panegyric poems developed by poets like Ka'ab ibn Zuhair and Hassan ibn Thabit came into limelight. With cultural norms brought about by Islam, Islamic themes were introduced with reference to Qur'anic verses, and embodiment of religious ideals reflected in the poems. However, the earlier structure of the *Qasida* with the *nasib*, *rahil* and *fakr* were still embedded in their poems. Ka'ab's poem, for instance, begins in the same style and structure of the period, that is, *nasib, rahil* and *fakr* are exemplified in lines 1-3, 13-18 and 38-44 respectively:

> BEATRICE [Su'ād] hath departed. Therefore was my heart that day distracted, raving after her, irredeemably enchained.

2. On the morrow of our separation, when she went forth, Beatrice was no other than a bleating antelope, with downcast glance, and eyes set off with collyrium.

3. When she smiles, she displays [a row of] teeth of glancing whiteness, as though it had been a damascened sword-blade, once tempered, and then dipped a second time in wine,

13. Beatrice is to-day in a land where naught can enable one to reach her, save the noble, generous, free-going she-camels.

14. And certainly nothing could carry one to her, save a huge and dauntless she-camel, possessed, against fatigue, of speed and endurance;

15. Of those which drench the roots of their ears when they sweat; whose unknown energy blurs all the road-marks;

16. Who looks at the highlands with the eyes of an isolated white addax, when the rocky flats and sand-hills are [as it were] on fire;

17. Whose neck is thick where her collar sits; whose pastern is plump; in whose build there is a superiority over the daughters of the stallion-camel;

18. Large-headed, large-jawed, strongly formed; in whose side is capaciousness; whose neck is an obelisk;

Every son of a female, long though his safety may be, is one day borne upon a ridged implement [a bier with a ridged lid]."

38. I have been informed that the Apostle of God hath threatened me; but pardon is hoped for from the Apostle of God.

39. "Respite!—May He guide thee (O Apostle!) aright, who hath given thee the free gift of the Qur'ān, in which are exhortations and detail!—

40. "Punish me not, then, at the words of calumniators: for I have not offended, though stories have multiplied concerning me."

41. Verily, I occupy a position, such that, were the elephant [of Abraha] to occupy it, and were to see and hear what I hear [and see],

42. Out of distraction would his shoulders tremble, unless generosities were shown by the Apostle of God.

43. I ceased not to traverse the wilderness, penetrating the folds of darkness, the skirts of night having dropped over all,

44. Until I have placed my right hand, which I will not remove, in the palm of him who had a claim to vengeance,—whose word is the word.

Ka'ab's father, (Zuhair), was one of the authors of the pre-Islamic poems known as the *Muallaqat*, and just like his father, Ka'ab and his brother, Bujayr, were also poets. With the advent of Islam, his brother embraced the new religion, and incensed by the news, Ka'ab composed a lampoon against the Prophet Muhammad (saw). However, he later accepted Islam and being penitent because of his earlier actions; he approached the Prophet and recited the "Poems of the Mantle". After

reciting the fifty-first verse, "Verily the Apostle is a light from which illumination is sought: a drawn Indian blade—one of the swords of God", the Prophet gave him his mantle. This incident was the reason for the title.

During the eighth and eleventh centuries, which is referred to as the Abbasid and Ghaznavid period, there were more obvious changes in themes and styles in the pre-Islamic and post-Islamic *Qasida*. Abū Tāmmam's (805-845 A.D.), "In praise of an Abassid Caliph" and Al-Mutanabbi's "In praise of Kafur" poems fall into these periods (8th-11th). According to Stefan and Shackle, three major changes are noticeable during this period which are: (i) "the fusion of the pre-Islamic heroic ideal, *murū'a*, with the new cultural norms brought by Islam"; (ii) "the *rahil* and its characteristic nomadic elements, such as camel description and desert scenes, while the *nasib* and *khamriyya* developed into independent strands of urban wine and love poetry…" and (iii) "the rise in the use of the *badi'*, a new style of illusionist imagery and rhetorical ornament (10-12). These changes are obvious in Abū Tāmmam's poem. For instance, instead of beginning with the traditional *aghrad*[3] (i.e *nasib or rahil*), he began by describing winter rains and went on reflecting on the flowers in spring time, then, to the goodness of the rain and the beauty of the flower which foretells the Imam's justice (Stefan and Shackle, 1996: 11).

In the case of Al-Mutanabi (915-965 A.D.), the poems reflect the conventional form, but with a new innovation of his own feelings and the realities happening in his life. The themes depicted in his poems are his relationships with his patrons. Traditionally, praise of patrons was part of the pre-Islamic ode and this is retained in his poems. He explains his relationship with his first patron, Saif al-Daula and then his

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[3] Means the traditional thematic units of poetry,(nasib, rahil, ritha, madih, hija) which make ups the Qasida in their various combinations.

departure from him and his allegiance to a new patron, Kafur, who was then the regent of Egypt.

During the period of twelfth and thirteen century, there were further changes in the themes and styles of the *Qasida*. Three themes stood out and became prominent during this period, which are: prophetic eulogy, Sufism and pious admonition (*wa'z*) (Stefan and Shackle, 1996: 15). Al-Busiriy's (1211- 1291) "*Qasida* Burdah" falls within the first theme, and his work is referred to as being the most famous which had the greatest impact on the *Qasida* genre as a whole. Literary critics agree that after the poems of Hassan ibn Thabit (ra), it was the "*Qasida* Burdah" of al-Busiriy - that sowed the true seeds of a typical poetic form of praise which has its own special structure and characteristics. They also consider him to represent the pinnacle of this genre both in the style and quantity of his panegyrics of the Prophet (saw). (Lubis, 1983: 2-3).

Stylistically, he begins in a different convention by dividing the poem into 10 chapters and 160 verses, while previous *Qasida* were not divided into chapters. Each chapter is categorized with different subject matter, starting with the "lyrical love yearning" and ending with "On Intimate Discourse and the Petition of One's State". Thematically, he began with the norm of the pre-Islamic period of introducing poems with love descriptions. The poem gives a short description of the woeful plight of a tender lover during his separation from his sweetheart (line 1-8). He begins with the panegyrics of the Prophet (saw) in line 29, and completes the poem by asking for an intercession and forgiveness.

Finally, the *Qasida* had gone through changes in the modern period between the nineteen and the twentieth century, due to colonialism and infiltration of Western ideals. Ahmad Karimi Hakkak argues that the conventional norms of the *Qasida* were

"violated, trespassed or submitted to willful disregard" during this period (1996: 273). According to Moreh:

> In poetry, the classical *Qasida* was revived in its form, diction, metaphors and themes, after its decline to low levels of weak and pseudo-classical verse …. From the second half of the nineteenth century there was an undercurrent of poetry influenced by Christian missionary activities and Western literatures, in which the poets gradually began to neglect all the features of the conventional *Qasida*, and tried to adopt a new and simple poetic style, more liberal forms and novel themes. (1976: 1-2).

Badawi l-Jabal's (1905–1981) "Love and God", a neoclassical *Qasida*, is an example of the neoclassical poems which falls in the modern period. It is a modern love poem composed in a traditional form. He uses imagery of perfumes, wine, houris and garlands in his poem in both modern and traditional way.

In the above discussion, it is evident that the *Qasida* had gone through an historical evolution from the pre-Islamic period to the modern time. Besides, since a "generic form is subject to change and the history of a genre can be portrayed as an interaction between forces of normative persistence and transformation" (Stefan and Shackle, 1996: 4), this study examines the historical evolution of the *Qasida* through six periods, beginning with the sixth century *Qasida* of Labid ibn Rabi'ah "Mu'allaqah" (590.), Ka'ab ibn Zuhair's "Poem of the Mantle" (670) in the seventh century, that of Abū Tāmmam "In Praise of an Abassid Caliph" (845) in the eighth century, Al-Mutanabbi "In Praise of Kafur" (965) in the late ninth century, the "*Qasida* Burdah" (1296) of Al-Būsīrīy in the twelfth century and, finally, that of Badawi l-Jabal "Love and God" (1981) in the twentieth century. This study investigates the changes in themes and styles of various periods of the *Qasida* by examining the poems of different centuries.

1.1 STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The *Qasida* as a literary form had undergone an evolution starting from the early pre-Islamic period to the middle of twentieth century. Considering the fact that the *Qasida* in its poetic form has gone through literary evolution for so many centuries and has continued to exist, the reasons why this form has lasted for so long are yet to be unraveled. Despite changes in themes and structure, the unique form still exists and is still referred to as *Qasida.*

However, although the *Qasida* is described as sycophantic flattery in exchange for material gain, studies of its socio-historical contexts and ceremonial dimensions have shown its complex literary, aesthetic and socio-political roles as a comprehensive medium of expression (Stetkevych, 1993: 12). Based on the historical context of the themes and styles of the *Qasida*, it can be said that the genre is established as a result of the socio- cultural style of pre-Islamic and post-Islamic poetry. However, there is a deviation from the past themes and style in the present-day *Qasida*.

Furthermore, it is known that as Christian and European literatures began flourishing in Muslim societies, Muslim poets were influenced as they gradually neglected the qualities of conventional *Qasida* in adopting a new and plain poetic style, and followed more liberal forms and novel themes in their poetic compositions. So, it is worthwhile to embark on a study that unravels the history of the *Qasida* with a link to its present form.

This is why this research aims at investigating the changes and varieties that have emerged from the classical to the contemporary period by examining the factors that have contributed to its survival and transmission for such a long period. This study sheds more light on the changes that have emerged through the evaluation of the themes and styles of different periods of the *Qasida*.

1.2 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

There have been writings on the ancient poetic form of the *Qasida*, which have been cultivated and spread through many languages over a long period of time, beginning from pre-Islamic era to the present time. However, there has not been any analysis of the manner in which the themes and styles have evolved and developed within the analytical approach and theoretical framework of evolution.

This study analyses the historical development of the *Qasida*'s themes and styles across various periods, beginning with the sixth century *Qasida* of Labid ibn Rabiʿah's "Muʿallaqah", Kaʿab ibn.Zuhair's "Poem of the Mantle" in the seventh century, that of Abū Tāmmam's "In Praise of an Abassid Caliph" in the eighth century, Al-Mutanabbi's "In Praise of Kafur" in the late ninth century, the "*Qasida* Burdah" of Al-Būsīrīy in the twelfth century, and that of Badawi l-Jabal's "Love and God" in the twentieth century.

This research contributes to the existing scholarship on the *Qasida* which has mostly been negatively criticized despite some positive appraisal of the form. It will also provide some insights in the thematic pre-occupations of the various periods as they are related to the society in which they were produced.

1.3 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Mouton (1996) states the objectives of research as that which gives broad indication of what researchers wish to achieve in their research. The objectives of this study are two-fold:

1. To examine the changes in the themes and styles of the *Qasida* during its historical evolution between the sixth and the twentieth century.

2. To describe the exact nature of the *Qasida* in different centuries. I have chosen these specific periods to show the pattern of developments in themes and styles.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study will focus on the following research questions:

1. Has the *Qasida*h undergone thematic and stylistic changes over the centuries, since its inception in the pre-Islamic period? If so, when and how?

2. How are these changes reflected in the various *Qasida*h selected for this study?

1.5 THEORETCAL FRAMEWORK

There have been serious discussions on the intricate relationship between the text and context, and over the years, "the history of literary theory, in a sense, can be viewed as a series of theoretical battles between textualism and contextualism, swaying like a pendulum with momentary victories to one side or the other, reflecting the oscillation between the verbal-literary champions of textualism and socio-historical champions of contextualism". (Lai, 2006: 2).   The new historicism, mainly based on Michael Foucault's theory, developed during the 1980s, was basically in response to the text-centered or formalistic approach. Walter Cohen observes that when new historicism came into prominence in 1980s, "it represented something new in north America in its combination of theory, criticism, and historical scholarship, all of them informed by a vaguely leftist sensibility" (1987:33).

Although the assumptions and practices of the theory began before 1979-1980s, the formulation of the theory started with the writings and publication of numerous essays such as "Improvisation and Power", and "Professing the

Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture." by Louis Monstrose's and texts by Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning.*

Defining the term "new historicism" is important in other to give us a clear understanding of the theory. Stephen Greenblatt is said to have coined the word "new historicism" (1980:5) given an alternative name to it, "Poetic of Culture". (1982:6). Contrary to other literary theories that consider the literary text and history as an independent entity, Greenblatt reveals the relationship between the text and history in his words "history cannot be divorced from textuality" (164.). To him, the critic's role is to investigate "both the social presence to the world of the literary text, and the social presence of the world in the literary text" (1980:5). Therefore, to understand the work of literature, the text cannot be divorced from its history.

Thus, a literary text must be looked at through its historical context and history be understood through literature. Louis Montrose defined it as that which centers on "the historicity of text and the textuality of history". New historicism therefore, is a theoretical approach to literature that proposes that literature must be read, studied and interpreted within the historical context of its creation. It is in this sense that works of literature such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was interpreted by Monstrose as a "representations" of the culture from which they emerge. According to Myers (1989), the theory is based on four main contentions:

> i. Literature is historical; it is a social and cultural construct shaped by more than one consciousness. It may be inferred also that literature is not an individual representation but a collective one, like a tale of many voices; ii. Literature must be assimilated to a particular vision of history; iii. Man himself is a social construct, an intertwined composition of social and political forces, like any work of literature; iv. The historian/critic is trapped in his own "historicity", therefore a modern reader can never experience a text as its contemporaries did. Thus, the best a modern historicist approach to literature can hope to accomplish is to use the text as a basis for the reconstruction of an ideology. (2-3).

In addition, Charles Bressler explains that:

> New Historicism asserts that there exists an intricate connection between an aesthetic object (a text or any work of art) and society, while denying that a text can be evaluated in isolation from its cultural context. We must know, it declares, the societal concerns of the author, of the historical times evidenced in the work, and of other cultural elements exhibited in the text before we can devise a valid interpretation. (1999: 131).

The practitioner of this theory would seek therefore, to recover the original ideology which produced the text, and which the text in turn helped to spread throughout a culture. For instance, the "Poem of the Mantle" by Ka'ab ibn Zuhair, historically reflected the ideas that produced the poem. The poem was written after he first composed a lampoon against the prophet (saw). This was because his brother Bujar accepted Islam, and this infuriated him. Later, Ka'ab renounced his former faith and went to the Prophet (saw), whom he addressed in the words: "Apostle of God, were I to bring to you Ka'ab the son of Zuhayr, penitent and professing the faith of Islam, wouldst thou receive and accept him?"—The Prophet answered: "I would." "Then," said the Poet, "I am he."

The above episode which reflected the author's communal concern is presented in the thirty-eighth verse, with a description of his interview with the Prophet, his hope of being pardoned, his fear of the dread vengeance he had evoked. When Ka'ab reached the fifty-first verse: "Verily the Apostle is a Light from which illumination is sought: a drawn Indian blade—one of the Swords of God", the Prophet (saw) removed his mantle, and gave it to the poet, as an honour, and as a mark of protection. This historical incident has been the reality portrayed by the poem, and the reason for the title "The Poem of the Mantle". Furthermore, in order not to return to the old historicist's way of analysing a text, the new historicist insists that to unlock textual meaning, three areas of concerns need to be investigated, which include: "the

life of the author; the social rules and dictates found within a text; and the reflection of world's historical situation as evidenced in the text." (Bressler, 1999: 134).

This theory contends that the themes and styles of the *Qasida* can only be understood through the culture and society that produced it. Besides, based on the fact that literature is not a distinctive class of human activity, the *Qasida* can best be understood when it is incorporated with the past, which portrays a particular period of history. Hence, this study aims to examine the changes in the themes and styles of the *Qasida* by investigating its historical evolution between the sixth and the twentieth century.