

Khalifa Umar bin al-Khattab - Inter-Personal Relations and Interactions

Imra-ul-Qais

Imra-ul-Qais was a great poet of Arabia of the pre Islamic period. His grandfather was King Harith of Kinda, the antagonist of Mundhir III, king of Hira. King Harith was killed in a battle against Hira. On the death of Harith, his kingdom was split up into a number of principalities. One of such principalities, the Banu Asad was ruled by Hujr who was the father of Imra-ul-Qais.

There is a story that Imra-ul-Qais was banished by his father who despised him for being a poet, and was enraged by the scandals of the adventures of his love. Imra-ul-Qais led a wild life, and came to be known as the 'Vagabond prince.'

Hujr was killed by an enemy. When the news of the death of his father reached Imra-ul-Qais, he cried "My father wasted my youth, and now that I am old, he has laid upon me the burden of avenging his death. Wine to-day, business tomorrow." Seven nights he indulged in carouse. Thereafter he swore not to eat flesh, or drink wine, nor use ointment, nor wash his head until he had avenged the death of his father. He visited the oracle in the valley of Tabala north of Najran, and drew the omen by drawing an arrow. The arrow that he drew was to the effect that such vengeance was forbidden. He broke the arrow and dashed it against the face of the idol saying "If your father had been killed, you would not have hindered me."

Thereafter he set out for Constantinople, where he was favourably received by the Byzantine emperor Justinian, who desired to see the power of Kinda re-established as a counter poise to Hira which was subject to Persia. At Constantinople' Imra-ul-Qais was involved in a love affair with a Byzantine princess. In order to get rid of him, the emperor appointed him the Governor of Palestine. He was awarded an official robe which he was required to wear throughout his journey. The robe was poisoned, and Imra-ul-Qais died of the effects of the poisoned robe in the course of the journey around 540.

In Stray Thoughts, Iqbal has assessed the poetry of Imra-ul-Qais in the following terms:

"Of the poet Imra-ul-Qais who flourished about 40 years before Islam, our Prophet is reported to have said, 'He is the most poetic of all poets and their leader to hell'. Now, what do we find in the poetry of Imra-ul-Qais. Sparkling wine, enervating sentiments and situations of love, heart rending moans over the ruins of habitations long swept away by stormy winds, superb pictures of the inspiring scenery of silent deserts- and all this in the choicest expression of old Arabia. Imra-ul-Qais appeals more to imagination than to will, and on the whole acts as a narcotic on the mind of the reader. The Prophet's criticism reveals this most important art principle-that the good in art is not necessarily identical with the good in life. It is possible for a poet to write fine poetry and yet lead his society to hell. The poet is essentially a seducer; woe to the people if instead of making the trials of life look beautiful and attractive he embellishes decadence with all the glories of health and power, and seduces the people to extinction. Out of the richness of his nature he ought to lavish on others something of the super-abundance of life and power in him, and not steal away, thief-like, the little they already happen to possess."

Umar admired the excellency of the poetry of Imra-ul-Qais and the originality of his themes. It is related that Abdullah bin Abbas once asked Umar of his opinion about Imra-ul-Qais when he said:

"He was the foremost. He brought fresh water from the well of poetry and gave sight to blind themes?"

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