

Ash'ab: An Icon of Sarcasm Against Hunger and Poverty



Ash'ab's anecdotes are remembered for their lightness, humor, and trickery in Arab culture. He is distinct in his parasitism, earning him the title of the king of parasites. He has been a humorous icon throughout the ages, not only because he knows how to take advantage of situations but also because of his talent for making people laugh with his sarcastic, provocative, and critical commentary on society.

Ash'ab, the parasite, refers to Ash'ab bin Jubair Al-Madani, who is said to be the maternal uncle of Al-Asma'i. He was a servant of Uthman bin Affan, may God be pleased with him. On the day the rebels attacked Uthman's house, he witnessed Uthman, may God be pleased with him, instructing those around him to sheathe their swords. Uthman urged them by saying, "Whoever sheaths his sword is free for the sake of God," so that sedition would not ignite. Ash'ab earned his freedom because he was the first to respond to Uthman's command and sheath his sword on that day.

Humor was born from hunger and poverty.

The Arabs who lived on the Arabian Peninsula, particularly in the valley of Mecca, during the pre-Islamic era and the early days of Islam, were not open to outside nations. Their movements were largely limited to seasonal journeys between the peninsula and the Levant, as well as between the peninsula and Yemen. As a result, the variety of their food was quite limited.

Allah the Almighty tells us in His Holy Book, through the words of our master Abraham, peace be upon him: “Our Lord! I have settled some of my offspring in a barren valley, near Your Sacred House, our Lord, so that they may establish prayer. So, make the hearts of believing people incline towards them and provide them with fruits, so perhaps they will be thankful.” This was the situation when Hajar, peace be upon her, set foot carrying her son. Famine, hunger, lack of provisions, and scarcity of fruits characterized that region from the beginning until the stage of conquests.

It was not surprising, therefore, that Hashim, the grandfather of the Prophet—may God bless him and grant him peace—was frequently mentioned among the Arabs. He gained recognition for providing food to the pilgrims and ensuring their sustenance. Although his real name was Amr, he became better known by his nickname, which he earned due to his generosity in breaking bread with others.

During that time, class differences among the Arabs were not very pronounced, as even the wealthy experienced food shortages, and the types of food available were relatively uniform. As a result, fame for generosity flourished; singing praises of the generous and sharing stories and anecdotes about them became the norm.

In the early days of Islam, during the time of prophecy, when Medina and its leader established the first foothold of Islam, little changed in their daily lives. Aisha, may God be pleased with her, recounts life in the Prophet's (peace and blessings of God be upon him) house, saying, “The new moon, the new moon, the new moon,” meaning that no fire was lit in the house of the Messenger of God. For three consecutive months, no food was cooked there. She continues, “Our food consisted of the two black things: dates and water.” The Prophet (peace and blessings of God be upon him) placed great value on having vinegar, as it was a staple condiment.

Anyone who studies the period from the establishment of the Sacred House to the early conquests will notice that there was no class protest or the emergence of stories, anecdotes, and jokes about parasites. The dominant values during this time celebrated generosity and praiseworthy behavior, while stinginess was condemned. This changed when interactions with other nations began, leading to a blending of social customs and the transfer of different values. As a result, various social classes emerged, including those deemed as parasites. During this time, Ash'ab became the first sarcastic and spontaneous protester of the situation, creating jokes about hunger.

The strange thing is that all the synonyms of the word laughter in the language came from derivatives of food and what is around it, so humor comes from fruit, anecdote comes from salt, travesty comes from rarity, and rare thing means scarce. Joke comes from synonyms of dates, and farce comes from emaciation, and humor comes from the food container, so most of them are about food and its scarcity, or the frequent search for it and checking its

banquets.

Ash'ab embodies the state of hunger and poverty:

It is said that every person has a connection to their name, and while this applies to individuals in varying degrees, it is particularly true for Ash'ab. The name Ash'ab means "an irrevocable separation," and in Arabic, the phrase "Ash'ab so-and-so" indicates that "so-and-so has died," as mentioned in *Lisan al-Arab*. Ash'ab distanced himself from the customs and traditions commonly observed in Islamic society, such as generosity, contentment, and chastity. He even moved away from the teachings he learned through reading and memorizing the Quran, signifying this significant separation. He transformed into a clown who, beneath the veil of humor, offered sharp criticism of everyone. Was Ash'ab merely a greedy individual who made people laugh to fill his own stomach? Or was he using his jokes, anecdotes, and playful banter with the wealthy at their tables as a form of protest, mockingly stealing their food? By criticizing the rich for their monopolization of wealth and their stinginess toward the poor, did he assert his rights in a way that shielded him from potential retaliation?

To fully understand the actions of Ash'ab and the parasitic class that followed him, we need to recognize that protests against hunger and poverty have always existed, albeit in various forms. In the pre-Islamic era, a group of vagabonds emerged who targeted the caravans of wealthy individuals known for their greed, plundering them to distribute their goods among the poor. When Islam was introduced, it brought guidance on zakat (charitable giving) and charity. However, over time, the distinctions between the earlier generations and their successors led to new issues that called for protest. In response, protest emerged through humor, particularly exemplified by Ash'ab.

Ash'ab represents a distinct pattern of behavior; society provided him with a space that was accepted both by the public and by the rulers. The collective mindset of the people embraced Ash'ab and his class as a source of entertainment, adding enjoyment to their events. Meanwhile, the palace, representing the rulers, allowed this phenomenon to continue as an outlet for society to express its frustrations. This indicates the early beginnings of political humor.

The meanings behind jokes: Al-Jahiz, in his book *Al-Bukhala*, narrated anecdotes by Ash'ab, focusing on them from a news perspective alongside Al-Dahhak. However, if we pause to examine these anecdotes more closely, we can uncover deeper meanings. Each story serves as a critique of the behavior of the wealthy in society, highlighting issues created by those who have contributed to the current state of affairs. Additionally, these anecdotes address values that may be overlooked by some individuals.

Al-Isfahani narrated in his book Al-Aghani that Ash'ab once passed by a woman making a dish of palm fronds; he said to her, "Add to it and make it spacious." She said, "Why?" He said, "Perhaps something will be given to me in it." Ash'ab here, consciously or unconsciously, points to the value of exchanging gifts, checking on neighbors, and giving food as gifts. It seems that we may have overlooked the moment when Abu Dharr Al-Ghifari (may Allah be pleased with him) protested against the Umayyads' misuse of funds. He objected to their extravagance, lavishly building palaces, and spending public money on gifts for poets.

In another scene, Ash'ab refers to the inability of many to marry and their lack of means when they ask him, "How much is your greed, Ash'ab?" He responds with something that would never occur to anyone, saying, "No bride was brought to Medina except that I cleaned my house and opened my door so that they might bring her to me." A scathing criticism of the difficulty of marriage and poverty in his time, Ash'ab presents it in the form of foolishness and greed.

Perhaps Ash'ab's most dangerous joke came when someone asked him, "Is there anyone greedier than you?" He replied, "Yes, I once saw a dog following a person eating gum for over a mile, hoping he would drop some of what he was enjoying." In Ash'ab's view, even animals were not exempt from the luxury of the wealthy and their indifference to the plight of those around them, whether human or animal.

Ash'ab and the greed of the wealthy

Wealth increased and trade thrived among nations. However, many merchants were careless in how they acquired their money and few sought solutions or maintained integrity. Materialistic values began to permeate the lives of these merchants, leading to greater class divides, resulting in the rich becoming richer while the poor grew even poorer.

Here, Ash'ab puts in his two cents and tells us about a slave girl who came to him with a dinar and asked him to keep it as a trust with him until she requested it. When she returned to him asking for his dinar after a while, he said to her: It is there, lift the mattress and take his son. When she lifted the mattress, she found a dirham next to it, so she took it. She returned again and the matter was repeated. She returned a third time and he repeated it with her. When she came to him a fourth time, Ash'ab showed crying and wailing and said to her: May God reward you greatly, the dinar died postpartum. The slave girl shouted at him: Does the dinar die? Ash'ab said: O wicked woman, you believe in its birth but do not believe in postpartum!

Ash'ab and the manipulation of the jurists with the Quran:

As usual in his smooth presentation of harsh criticism and mockery of the situation; Ash'ab sat in the Caliph's council and the Caliph was eating sweets, so he gave him one of them and he ate it, then he said (the second of two) so the Caliph gave him the second, then he added and reinforced us with a third, so he took the third and ate it, then he said (take four of the birds) so he got the fourth, and so on until he reached the verse (Indeed, the number of months with Allah is twelve months) so the Caliph gave him the whole plate.. Ash'ab said to him, by Allah, if you do not give it to me, you will reach (Then We sent him to a hundred thousand or more). Ash'ab was quoting verses from the Quran that included numbers to support his argument.

The general community did not escape Ash'ab's harsh criticism. When he led the people in prayer, he significantly shortened the prayer. The people asked him, 'Did you shorten your prayer?' He replied that it was because it was not mixed with hypocrisy. In every anecdote and joke, Ash'ab displayed a deep, sarcastic criticism. He began by addressing the issues of need, hunger, and poverty, pointing out their causes, identifying those responsible, and criticizing a society that remained silent about these problems. He framed all of this by portraying himself as greedy, parasitic, avaricious, and foolish.

Al-Jahiz, Imam Al-Dhahabi, and Ibn Kathir showed interest in the stories of Ash'ab and other similar figures. While Ash'ab excelled in his craft, their focus was limited to the news surrounding these characters. They did not study it as a social protest phenomenon; however, it can be viewed as a historical and artistic document rich with political, social, and literary implications. In his arguments and trickery, the parasite embodies rebellion against society, asserting his right to live through humor. He confronts his opponents with reasoning that often strays from logic, engaging instead in a rhetorical debate where he counters arguments with his own. His goal is to use eloquence and wit to amuse the audience (the host) in order to undermine his opponent and share in the feast.