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Power and Poetics: A Literary and Cultural Study of Al-Mutannabi's Self-Glorifying Odes in The Abbasid Era

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Abstract: *This study analyzes ten selected poems by Al-Mutanabbi, a prominent poet of the Abbasid period, through literary and cultural lenses. Known for his grandiose self-representation, Al-Mutanabbi utilized the Arabic qasida form not merely for praise, but as a medium to construct a heroic poetic persona. This paper aims to investigate how Al-Mutanabbi's verse functions as a discursive space where power, identity, and poetics converge. Using a formalist literary approach (Wellek & Warren) and supported by cultural poetics (Greenblatt) and Islamic literary theory (Stetkevych), the study explores Al-Mutanabbi's rhetorical devices—such as metaphor, hyperbole, and parallelism—and the ideological messages embedded in his language. The research finds that Al-Mutanabbi's poetry is not only a reflection of Abbasid court culture, but also a tool of cultural self-fashioning, where the poet elevates himself above patrons and rulers. Ultimately, the study reveals that Al-Mutanabbi transformed classical Arabic poetry into a platform of intellectual resistance and symbolic power, redefining the role of the poet within Islamic cultural history. His work serves as both a literary monument and a declaration of sovereignty over meaning, highlighting the capacity of language to shape identity and authority in early Islamic civilization.*

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Introduction

The Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258 CE) marks a pivotal era in Islamic civilization, often regarded as its intellectual and cultural zenith. During this time, the Islamic world witnessed not only the flourishing of sciences and theology but also the golden age of Arabic literature. Within this vibrant cultural matrix, poetry functioned as a central medium of expression, both artistic and political. The Abbasid court, particularly in Baghdad, became a hub of literary patronage, where poets and scholars contended for recognition and reward. Poetry was not merely ornamentation—it was a performance of intellect, loyalty, identity, and ideology.

In this competitive environment emerged Abū al-Ṭayyib Aḥmad ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Mutanabbī (915–965 CE), one of the most controversial and celebrated figures in classical Arabic literature. His name, meaning “the one who claims prophethood,” itself signals his boldness and ambition. Al-Mutanabbi was not content with the conventional role of the poet as court flatterer; instead, he revolutionized Arabic poetics by transforming praise poetry (*madīḥ*) into a vehicle for personal glorification and philosophical assertion. His verses bristle with rhetorical power, filled with themes of pride, fate, identity, and heroic defiance.

Al-Mutanabbi's verses are well-known for their audacious tone and their unapologetic celebration of the self. In many of his odes (*qaṣīda*), he constructs an image of himself as a heroic, almost prophetic figure—someone whose mastery of language grants him symbolic and even moral authority over rulers and adversaries. Rather than simply praising his patrons, Al-Mutanabbi often uses the space of the poem to exalt his own virtues: intelligence, courage, and poetic superiority. These themes are especially pronounced in his poems composed during his time at the court of Sayf al-Dawla, a Hamdanid ruler in

northern Syria.

Born in Kufa and active in Aleppo and Egypt, Al-Mutanabbi lived through a time of political fragmentation and shifting allegiances. His career unfolded in the courts of Sayf al-Dawla and others, but he was often disillusioned with patronage, turning instead to himself as the central figure of praise. His poems consistently blur the lines between panegyric and autobiography, making him a unique figure in Arabic literature—both admired and criticized for his unapologetic ego and visionary poetics.

This journal article seeks to explore ten representative poems by Al-Mutanabbi through the lens of literary form and cultural power. The aim is to examine how Al-Mutanabbi uses poetic devices—such as metaphor, parallelism, and hyperbole—not merely as ornaments, but as instruments of self-construction and political commentary. Through this analysis, the paper will demonstrate that his poetry functions as a space where personal identity, political ideology, and artistic ambition intersect.

The methodology combines a formal literary approach, focusing on language and structure, with a cultural-historical analysis that situates the poems within the Abbasid courtly milieu. This approach is supported by theoretical insights from Wellek and Warren's literary theory, Stephen Greenblatt's cultural poetics, and Suzanne Stetkevych's studies on Arabic *qasida* and legitimacy. By applying these frameworks, the paper argues that Al-Mutanabbi's work represents not only a poetic masterpiece but also a powerful discursive strategy that engages with the cultural and political tensions of his time.

In doing so, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how Arabic poetry in the early Islamic world was used not just to reflect social realities, but to shape them, positioning the poet as both an artist and an agent of meaning within a

complex historical context.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative approach that combines formalist literary analysis with cultural-critical interpretation. The primary data consist of ten selected poems by Al-Mutanabbi, chosen purposively based on their recurring themes of self-glorification, heroism, identity, and symbolic power. These poems are considered representative of Al-Mutanabbi's unique poetic style and ideological stance during the Abbasid period.

The formalist approach draws on the theoretical framework of Wellek and Warren, focusing on intrinsic literary elements such as diction, metaphor, hyperbole, structure, and rhetorical devices. Through close reading, this method explores how Al-Mutanabbi constructs his poetic persona and conveys his messages through the traditional qasida form. Special attention is given to the structure of the poems—particularly the opening (nasib), journey (rahil), and praise or satire (madih/hija')—and how Al-Mutanabbi modifies these elements to serve his personal agenda.

In addition to formal analysis, this research applies a cultural poetics framework inspired by Stephen Greenblatt. This perspective treats literature as a form of cultural discourse embedded in power structures and ideological contexts. Al-Mutanabbi's poetry is examined not only for its aesthetic value but also for how it engages with the sociopolitical environment of the Abbasid court. His manipulation of language is interpreted as a strategy of cultural self-fashioning and resistance within a complex web of patronage and authority.

Furthermore, the study incorporates Suzanne Stetkevych's theory of poetic legitimacy, which sees Arabic qasida as a tool for asserting symbolic and political authority. This lens allows the analysis to go

beyond surface meaning and uncover the ideological undercurrents in Al-Mutanabbi's verse. Each poem is analyzed textually and contextually, situating it within the broader historical, political, and literary landscape of its time.

A comparative component is also included, contrasting Al-Mutanabbi's poetic themes and strategies with those of other prominent Abbasid poets such as Abu Nuwas and Al-Buhturi. This comparison highlights Al-Mutanabbi's distinct philosophical ambition and rhetorical boldness, which set him apart as both a poet and an intellectual figure. Overall, the method employed is interpretative, thematic, and multidisciplinary, aiming to reveal the depth and significance of Al-Mutanabbi's poetry as both artistic expression and cultural intervention.

Results and Discussion

1. Heroism and Self-Image in Al-Mutanabbi's Poetry

One of the main characteristics of Al-Mutanabbi's poetry is his portrayal of himself as a heroic figure above the ordinary. In his poetry, he often addresses themes of personal greatness and extraordinary destiny that set him apart from other poets. In a famous couplet he writes:

"I am the one whose literature the blind can see,
And whose words the deaf can hear."

This stanza is not just a rhetorical play, but an expression of the poet's ethos-heroic-where the power of poetry becomes a means of self-aggrandizement. In the qasida tradition, poets used to praise patrons or rulers, but Al-Mutanabbi dares to reverse the direction of the praise to himself. This attitude shows that for Al-Mutanabbi, language is power, and poets are creators of meaning, not just servants of power.

2. Language Style and Rhetoric of Poetry

Al-Mutanabbi's rhetoric is characterized by the use of hyperbole, natural metaphors, antithesis and symmetry. For example, in the stanza:

"When you see the lion's fangs exposed,
Don't think the lion is smiling."

The lion metaphor is used repeatedly as a symbol of power, threat, and dignity. Al-Mutanabbi structured his poetry with the classical qasida structure: opening (nasib), transition (rahil), and praise or criticism (madih/hija'), but he modified this pattern to highlight his own persona instead of that of his patrons.

3. Poetry as Political and Social Discourse

Al-Mutanabbi was not only a panegyric poet, but also an agent of discourse. He once wrote a poem for Sayf al-Dawla, the Hamdanid leader, but later insulted other rulers through sharp satire. In his poetry, he constructs narratives of courage, honesty, and moral superiority that contrast with the corruption, weakness, or transience of unworthy rulers. Through a high style of language and powerful symbolism, Al-Mutanabbi created an image of himself as a poet greater than any court. He did not just want to be known as a great poet, but as a historical figure who lived through his poetry. Hence, his poems often contain a kind of personal and historical manifesto in poetic form.

An example in another stanza:

"The sword and the pen are in my hands;
I conquer both hearts and lands."

Here he combines two forms of power: military power (the sword) and intellectual power (the pen). This reflects a strategy of dual legitimacy—he is not only worthy of being heard, but also feared.

4. Symbolism and the Construction of Authority

Symbolism in Al-Mutanabbi's poetry is a powerful vehicle through which he asserts his intellectual and spiritual dominance. He draws upon both natural and metaphysical imagery to represent his self-

concept. The use of light, flame, and celestial bodies is particularly prevalent. In one poem, he writes:

"The sun rises from my words;
And the stars fall at my silence."

Here, cosmic symbols reinforce the idea that his speech has universal consequence. Light often connotes knowledge, revelation, and divine favor—suggesting that the poet's voice is not merely mortal but resonates with transcendent truth. This aligns with classical Arabic views of poets (shu'arā') as intermediaries between the divine and human realms, though Al-Mutanabbi extends this view to imply exclusive possession of revelation, almost rivaling prophecy. Moreover, symbolic inversion is common. Where kings are traditionally the source of light, Al-Mutanabbi suggests the opposite: it is he, the poet, who gives meaning to rulers. By presenting himself as the one who brings clarity, justice, and vision, he essentially repositions the source of legitimacy from throne to tongue.

5. Language and Eloquence as Power

Al-Mutanabbi constantly asserts that language is not merely a tool of beauty but a weapon of power. In his worldview, eloquence equals superiority. He often links poetry to warfare, arguing that words can wound deeper than swords. One famous line declares

"My words are sharper than blades;
And more enduring than kings."

This metaphor elevates the poet above warriors, suggesting that the true battlefield is cultural, not physical. In the Abbasid context—where intellectuals competed for patronage and prestige—this was a bold move. Al-Mutanabbi believed that poetic language could shape history, define legacies, and even immortalize or erase rulers. Through this lens, eloquence becomes a form of social and symbolic capital.

6. The Role of Fate and Existential Conflict

A recurring theme in Al-Mutanabbi's poetry is fate—its cruelty, unpredictability, and inevitability. Unlike

stoic resignation, however, his approach is to confront fate with defiance and pride. He writes

"I do not complain of fate, for I am its rival;
And I do not weep, for I command the stars."

Such verses illustrate not only fatalism but also self-deification, placing himself in mythic opposition to destiny itself. This existential conflict deepens the psychological dimension of his poetry, turning it from mere praise into philosophical resistance. It allows modern readers to connect with him as a figure wrestling with timeless questions of identity, mortality, and legacy.

7. Masculinity and Honor in Al-Mutanabbi's Verse

Al-Mutanabbi's poetry is deeply embedded in notions of masculine honor—bravery, pride, resistance, and public recognition. His qasidas are filled with martial metaphors, and he often asserts that death in glory is better than life in disgrace. This reflects both pre-Islamic tribal values and Islamic chivalric ideals. For example:

"No man lives forever;
But the brave dies once;
And the coward dies a thousand times."

His focus on personal integrity, even in exile or rejection, positions him as a model of heroic masculinity. However, this masculinity is not only physical but also intellectual—bravery is in thought, not just in battle. This dual identity reflects the Abbasid fascination with the philosopher-warrior archetype.

8. Alienation and the Outsider Figure

Despite his fame, Al-Mutanabbi frequently casts himself as a misunderstood outsider. He expresses frustration at being rejected by rulers who failed to recognize his worth. In many poems, he depicts himself wandering, longing for a patron who is worthy of his genius.

This theme of alienation adds emotional complexity. He is both powerful and vulnerable—a man too

brilliant for his time. His poetry thus becomes the voice of intellectual exile, which resonates across eras and cultures.

"I am a stranger among kin;
A lion among men who fear words."

In this sense, his alienation is not just social but epistemological—he represents the artist who sees too much and is therefore cast aside.

9. Legacy of Al-Mutanabbi as the "Poet of Pride"

Perhaps no other epithet fits Al-Mutanabbi better than "the poet of pride." His entire literary project revolves around asserting the dignity of the self, not in arrogance but as a response to a world that tries to minimize it. His legacy is built not on humility, but on a radical form of self-recognition.

His pride is transformative—it challenges systems of patronage, subverts poetic conventions, and proposes a new model for what it means to be a poet. In doing so, Al-Mutanabbi changes not just Arabic poetry, but the role of the intellectual in Islamic history.

He becomes not just a creator of verse, but a shaper of discourse, a rebel against mediocrity, and an example of poetic ambition that refuses to be tamed.

10. Comparative Perspective: Al-Mutanabbi and Other Abbasid Poets

When contrasted with other Abbasid poets like Abu Nawas or Al-Buhturi, Al-Mutanabbi stands apart not in his command of language—though remarkable—but in his thematic ambition and tone. Abu Nawas explored love, wine, and sensual pleasure, often masking political critique in satire. Al-Buhturi followed a more traditional panegyric model. Al-Mutanabbi, however, merged philosophical ambition with poetic form. His poems do not merely celebrate others; they construct a mythology of self. Where Abu Nawas defies orthodoxy through indulgence, Al-Mutanabbi defies power structures through ego and assertion. He is, in the words of

Stetkevych (2002), a “poet of contested sovereignty,” whose works implicitly question the rightful sources of power.

This comparison shows that Al-Mutanabbi extends the role of the poet—from chronicler or entertainer to philosopher-warrior, a self-authorized arbiter of truth and greatness.

Al-Mutanabbi's impact extends far beyond his lifetime. His verses are memorized in Arabic-speaking cultures, cited in political speeches, and studied in Islamic literary curricula. The themes he explores—honor, identity, destiny—resonate across centuries. Scholars such as Ibn Jinni, a famous grammarian and linguist of the time, admired Al-Mutanabbi's mastery of structure and sound. In fact, Ibn Jinni wrote an entire commentary (*Sharḥ Dīwān al-Mutanabbi*) devoted to explicating his style.

In modern Arab literary criticism, Al-Mutanabbi is sometimes viewed as the archetypal “intellectual rebel”, someone who sought transcendence through art in a world constrained by political loyalty and material survival. His verses are frequently referenced in contexts of national pride, resistance, and intellectual independence.

His continued relevance highlights the enduring power of poetry as a cultural and political force in Islamic civilization. Al-Mutanabbi, through language, carved a throne that no dynasty could dethrone.

In the tradition of classical Arabic poetry, Al-Mutanabbi continued to trace the *qasida* structure that had been established since pre-Islamic times. However, he adapted the style to the spirit of the Abbasid era, which was cosmopolitan, rational and full of political intrigue.

The Abbasids were not only a political empire, but also an empire of discourse: a place where Greek logic, Islamic sciences and the arts converged. Al-Mutanabbi's poetry reflects the tension between idealism and the realities of power, between the desire

for recognition and dissatisfaction with unequal patronage.

By placing himself at the center of the text, he engaged in what Greenblatt calls cultural self-fashioning: he shaped his identity as a great hero, thinker, and poet through the art of language. In the highly competitive Abbasid cultural tradition, Al-Mutanabbi refused to be a mere court servant - he demanded recognition as an equal to the king.

Conclusion

This study has explored the poetry of Al-Mutanabbi as a rich and multi-dimensional site of literary, cultural, and political significance within the Abbasid period. Through the analysis of ten carefully selected poems, it becomes clear that Al-Mutanabbi's verse is not merely an artifact of linguistic beauty or personal ambition; rather, it is a strategic and ideologically charged discourse that challenges the traditional hierarchies of poet and patron, speech and power, culture and control.

Al-Mutanabbi is the most prominent representation of the transformation of classical Arabic poetry from a mere instrument of praise to a tool of identity formation, power, and cultural discourse. An analysis of ten of his poems written during the Abbasid dynasty reveals that poetry for Al-Mutanabbi was not just a means of aesthetic expression, but a symbolic weapon to assert his existence as a person and poet above his contemporaries. He created not only beautiful verse, but also a legendary figure of himself in the history of Arabic literature.

The findings of this study demonstrate that Al-Mutanabbi's rhetorical techniques—particularly his manipulation of *qasida* structure, his symbolic command of nature and animals, and his invocation of fate—serve not merely aesthetic functions, but work to construct a narrative of resistance and legitimacy. His poetry becomes a medium of rebellion against both external expectations and

existential limitations. The poet is no longer a witness to greatness, but its very embodiment.

Moreover, by comparing Al-Mutanabbi's work to that of his Abbasid contemporaries, the study highlights his distinct philosophical depth and stylistic audacity. While other poets may have relied on tradition or flattery, Al-Mutanabbi turns the poetic genre inward, creating a body of work that reads like an evolving intellectual and emotional autobiography. His legacy is not confined to the medieval Arabic world; it continues to influence literary thought, political speech, and cultural imagination throughout the Islamic world today.

His poems are filled with hyperbole, animal metaphors, natural symbols, and grand claims about his immortality, bravery, and genius. Through this style of language, he inverted the function of classical poetry, which is usually intended to praise patrons, into an instrument of self-praise. His statements equating himself with prophets, lions, and even the forces of nature show great rhetorical daring, as well as a rejection of the poet's position as an appendage of power. Instead, he places himself at the center of this symbolic power.

In the context of the Abbasid dynasty, a period characterized by scientific advancement, complex court politics, and sharp intellectual competition, Al-Mutanabbi emerged as a court poet who was unwilling to submit fully. His poems reflect the tension between society's expectations of the poet's role and his personal ambition to dominate the cultural arena. In this analysis, we can see that Al-Mutanabbi's poetry is not only a tool to describe reality, but also shapes a new reality through language and imagination.

Through the formal (Wellek & Warren) and cultural poetics (Greenblatt & Stetkevych) approaches, this paper has shown that Al-Mutanabbi's works can be judged not only by the beauty of their form and the power of their language, but also by their ability to

convey discourse strategies-political, cultural, and personal. He wrote not just to be liked, but to be immortalized.

Al-Mutanabbi's contribution to classical Arabic literature thus lies not only in his poetic prowess, but also in the establishment of a new model of the poet as a culturally sovereign figure. In Al-Mutanabbi's hands, poetry became a place for poets to assert that the pen can match the sword, and words can shape history.

The conclusions of this study also open up space to see that in the early Islamic world, literature was an arena of resistance, an arena of existence, and an arena of negotiation of meaning. Al-Mutanabbi is living proof that language is power - and poets, if they are brave enough, can become masters of their own meaning.

Ultimately, this article affirms that Al-Mutanabbi was not only a master of language but a visionary of authorship. He understood the power of the word—not only to describe the world, but to shape it. In his verse, we find a model of poetic resistance, intellectual sovereignty, and cultural defiance that challenges us to rethink the role of the writer in society. In doing so, Al-Mutanabbi offers us more than poetry—he offers us a philosophy of the self.

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