

Arabic Mawlid Poetry And Its Cultural-Spiritual Significance In Egypt And Tamil Nadu: Evolution And Contemporary Relevance

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Abstract

Mawlid al-Nabi, the celebration of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, has evolved into a cultural tradition in the spiritual, social, and artistic fabric of Muslim societies worldwide. This article explores the historical development and cultural significance of Mawlid, with a focus on poetic and creative expressions in Egypt and Tamil Nadu, India. It also highlights the role of Mawlid poetry in strengthening communal bonds, examines the integration of Sufism in shaping the form and content of Mawlid recitations, and its importance in spiritual reflection and communal worship. This study uses a qualitative, descriptive, and comparative approach. It involves textual analysis of Mawlid poetry and literary works, contextual historical studies, and cultural interpretation to understand the evolution and significance of Mawlid al-Nabi in the Egyptian and Tamil contexts. Through a literature review and analysis of key Mawlid works, including Qasidatul Witriyyah and Subuhana Mawlid, the study reveals that local cultural practices, poetic styles, and religious sentiments have shaped the celebration, fostering unity among diverse Muslim communities. The continued relevance of Mawlid in modern society, particularly through media and performance, is its adaptability and enduring significance. Mawlid is a multifaceted tradition that bridges religious devotion, artistic expression, and cultural identity, affirming its central place in Islamic heritage. This study reveals that Mawlid poetry has flourished in Egypt and Tamil Nadu, reflecting adaptations to local cultural, linguistic, and religious contexts. The study suggests that these works are essential expressions of spiritual devotion and cultural identity, fostering community cohesion. The study highlights the distinctive linguistic styles, poetic devices, and motifs used in the compositions, illustrating Islamic religious literature's rich diversity and creativity. These findings have significant implications for Arabic language teaching, as integrating Mawlid poetry into the curriculum can enhance student's cultural awareness and appreciation of Arabic and Islamic heritage. Mawlid's poetry's spiritual and cultural relevance also provides a meaningful context that can motivate students, making language learning more engaging and authentic.

Keywords: Eulogy; Prophet Muhammad; Poetry; Heritage; India; Arab.

INTRODUCTION

The *Mawlid al-Nabi*, the commemoration of the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) birth, holds significant cultural, spiritual, and historical importance in the Islamic world. Over the centuries, it has evolved from a purely religious observance into a rich cultural tradition that incorporates both spiritual devotion and artistic expression. This article explores the evolution of the *mawlid* celebrations, analyzing the different aspects of its form, the role of poetry and the intellectual debates surrounding its religious and cultural implications. Through this examination, we will also address how the *mawlid* navigates the delicate balance between religious fervor and artistic expression, analyzing its role as a medium for spiritual reflection, community bonding and the transmission of Islamic teachings. This study also examines the rich literary and artistic expressions inspired by the Arabic Mawlid compositions of Egypt and Tamil Nadu, highlighting its influence on devotional poetry, music, and art. By contextualizing the celebration within historical and contemporary frameworks, this article sheds light on how *Mawlid al-Nabi* serves as a bridge between tradition and modernity, fostering unity and a renewed connection to the Prophet's exemplary life and message.

METHOD

The research begins with a thorough review of related scholarly materials, original texts, and existing studies on *Mawlid al-Nabi* works in Egypt and Tamil Nadu, focusing especially on the Mawlid compositions in Arabic. This exploration identifies recurring themes, gaps in the research, and relevant theoretical approaches for the study.

Data Collection: Both primary and secondary resources are utilized. Original works by scholars from Egypt and Tamil Nadu, including texts such as *Al Qasidatul Witriyyah*, *Al Qasidatash Shaf'iyyah*, and *Minhatu Sarandib Fi Mawlidil Habib*, form the core primary sources. Secondary materials include scholarly articles, books, and historical documents relevant to the Mawlid tradition and Arabic literary heritage.

Data Analysis: The gathered material undergoes qualitative analysis, identifying key themes, stylistic features, linguistic aspects, and the messages within the panegyrics. Comparative analysis is also applied to uncover parallels and contrasts between different Mawlid compositions.

Contextualization: Each Mawlid work is analyzed within its broader historical, cultural, and religious setting, with specific attention to the social context of Tamil Nadu during its creation. This contextual analysis helps clarify the motivations and significance of the panegyrics within the Islamic tradition.

Interpretation and Discussion: Insights from the analysis are discussed in relation to the study's aims, exploring the themes, historical importance, and literary devices used in the Mawlid works, and assessing their contributions to Arabic literature in Egypt and Tamil Nadu. This section also reflects on the broader implications of these works in promoting love, respect, and reverence for the Prophet.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Importance of Mawlid: The study may reveal the Mawlid's crucial role in expressing devotion, love, and respect for the Prophet (PBUH), showing how it strengthens the spiritual connection among Muslims in Egypt and Tamil Nadu. **Evolution of Mawlid:** The study might highlight how the Mawlid tradition developed, particularly through the influence of Sufism, emphasizing how it became a structured form for

expressing reverence and emotional connection within the community. Prominent Mawlid Works: By examining specific panegyrics from Egypt and Tamil Nadu, including compositions like Burda, Barzanji Mawlid, Subhana Mawlid, and others, the research may reveal these works' themes, language, and contributions to the Arabic literary tradition of Egypt and Tamil Nadu.

1. Historical Development of Mawlid Poetry

This examines the chronological evolution of Mawlid poetry in Egypt and Tamil Nadu, highlighting key periods of transformation and the influence of socio-political contexts on poetic themes and styles.

2. Cultural and Religious Significance

Here, the focus is on the role of Mawlid poetry in expressing religious devotion and reinforcing cultural identity within different communities, as well as its function in communal celebrations and spiritual practices.

3. Linguistic Features and Poetic Devices

This analyzes the linguistic characteristics, stylistic features, and poetic devices employed in Mawlid compositions, emphasizing regional variations and creative expressions that enrich the poetic tradition.

4. Cross-Cultural Influences and Exchanges

This explores instances of cultural exchange between Egyptian and Tamil Mawlid traditions, demonstrating how these interactions have shaped thematic and stylistic elements within the poetry.

5. Implications for Arabic Language Teaching

It discusses the pedagogical benefits of incorporating Mawlid poetry into Arabic language curricula, including fostering cultural awareness, enhancing linguistic skills, and promoting critical analysis of poetic texts.

The Origins and Traditional Significance of *Mawlid*

The Arabic term *Mawlid* means “birthplace” or “birth date.” The birth of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is celebrated on the 12th day of the Islamic month of Rabi' al-Awwal. From the first day of this month until the 12th, eulogies about the Prophet are recited in mosques and homes. These eulogies are known as *Mawlid*. The practice of reciting Mawlids exists in countries like Turkey, Egypt, India, and Arabia (Zubair 2022).

The *mawlid* celebration has its roots in the early Islamic period, though it did not become widespread immediately after the Prophet's death. The first significant celebrations began in the Fatimid period (10th century) in Egypt, where the ruler, al-Mu'izz li-Din, officially sanctioned the event (Maqqari al-Tilmisani, 1631). The day was marked by gatherings, prayers, and the recitation of poetry that honored the life and virtues of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The *mawlid* gradually spread to other parts of the Muslim world, gaining prominence especially among Sufi circles, who viewed it as a time for deep reflection on the Prophet's life, virtues, and spiritual significance.

After the Prophet passed away, eulogies mourning his loss were composed by the Four Caliphs, Fatimah al-Zahra, Safiyya bint Abdul Muttalib, and Abu Sufyan ibn al-Harith. Inspired by their desire for spiritual elevation, these verses evolved into *Mawalid* (plural of *Mawlid*) during the 8th century Hijri and continue to inspire to this day (Zubair 2022). *The Burda*, *Al-Ishriniyyat*, *Al-Qasida Al-Witriyya*, along with other significant compositions, have contributed to shaping the tradition of praise poetry for the Prophet across different regions. This profound spiritual connection to the Prophet Muhammad

has inspired numerous literary creations in various languages, reflecting the rich projection of Islamic cultural expression. Scholars from Tamil Nadu, India and Egypt have made notable contributions to this literary heritage, producing Arabic works that span subjects like praise poetry, jurisprudence, creed, and biography. Their panegyrics often convey themes of love, commitment to Islam, and reverence for the Prophet and his family, embodying both diverse styles and meaningful devotion. These works have become central to the literary culture of Sufism and have deepened the Islamic poetic tradition, fostering a lasting heritage of praise and veneration for the Prophet (Zubair, 2024).

The *Mawlid* Serves As Multiple Functionary

It is a spiritual event where the community gathers to remember the Prophet's life, as well as a cultural practice that encompasses a variety of artistic forms such as poetry and storytelling. In the early days, the poetry recited during *mawlid* was simple in nature, yet it carried profound emotional and spiritual significance. It was a means of veneration and an outlet for the devotion of the people, as well as an expression of communal identity.

Artistic Expression in *Mawlid* Celebrations

One of the most distinctive aspects of *mawlid* celebrations is the use of poetry. The *mawlid* is often characterized by its lyrical elements, with recitations and songs performed in honor of the Prophet. These performances are not merely artistic but are deeply connected to the religious sentiment of the occasion. The poems sung during *mawlid* are sometimes elaborate and filled with mythical elements, reflecting the cultural preferences of the people, rather than strictly adhering to historical accuracy.

The term *Mawlid* is also used to signify the commemoration of the birthday of the Prophet and other revered figures in Islam. For Muslims living outside Arab countries, these Mawlid festivals help reinforce adherence to religious practices. Today, Mawlid recitations occur in private homes in Mecca and Medina as well (Zubair 2022).

Mawlid in Prose and Poetry

Most *mawlid* texts are written in a rhythmic prose that can be chanted and sung, and only those with rhymed, poetic endings that resemble traditional odes in maintaining rhyme have gained popularity among the public. Here, we can cite few examples:

The first example is from al-Barzanji (Mubarak, 2022), who writes:

"With his birth, extraordinary phenomena and wonders emerged, Signs of his prophethood and divine favor became clear; The skies were adorned and protected from the rebellious demons, And stones were pelted upon every cursed devil, As omens of his glory led people to him, And flames of the fire-worshippers were extinguished in Persia, The throne of Khosrow cracked, walls of the palace were rent, Fourteen of its lofty balconies collapsed, And the idols of the temples of Persia fell to the ground, The sacred fire, long-worshipped, was extinguished, The lake at Sawah receded, its waters diminished, And the sea in the land of Hamadhan withdrew."

This poetic passage from al-Barzanji encapsulates various symbolic events that, according to tradition, occurred around the time of the Prophet's birth.

The second example is a passage by al-Manawi (Mubarak, 2022):

“When he was carried, peace be upon him, all the gates of Hell were shut, And the gates of Paradise were opened with joy, Heavenly light and divine mercy spread across the lands, And the Throne of God itself shook with celebration, All of creation was illuminated, Even the birds proclaimed in the language of eloquence, ‘The guide of the world has arrived, The one who will carry the message of God, by the Lord of the Ka‘bah. Wild animals in both the East and West bowed in reverence, And the creatures of the earth felt peace; The flames of the ancient fires extinguished, As darkness gave way to the dawn, For relief came after hardship, Justice emerged, and oppression vanished, The lions and beasts found tranquility, And his mother bore him with neither burden nor pain, Without hardship, discomfort, or exhaustion, His carrying began on a Friday night in the month of Rajab, And his birth took place on a Monday night in Rabi‘ al-Awwal, Proclaiming the unity of God.”

Al-Manawi’s *mawlid* became extremely famous and was so well-regarded that it was made into phonograph records. People would listen to it on the radio, and in the Odeon collection, there is a record by Shaykh Ibrahim al-Farran that contains an enchanting excerpt from the *Mawlid an-Nabi* (the Prophet’s Birthday celebration). It is likely that similar recordings of other *mawlid* texts also exist. The third example is from Sadaqathullah Appa al-Shafiyi, who writes:

“Gems of my poetry in praise of Muhammad
Illuminate all time except for Muhammad
For his praiser, if met by fire, it extinguishes
A paradise of delights is the reward of Ahmad's praiser
And the attentive one, with every good trait, he adorns”

The fourth example is also from Sadaqathullah Appa al-Shafiyi’s *Mukhammas Dhukril Maadi*, who relates (Zubair 2023) :

“No entry for Satan in my heart's veins.
No space for doubt here, nor a hint of sin,
Surely, my hope in you resides within.
Gardens of paradise, filled with serenity.

These lines became popular in and around Tamil Nadu due to its content and genre. The poetic forms used in *mawlid* celebrations are often simple and accessible, appealing to the masses. These poems are typically written in a rhymed, rhythmic form, and are designed to be easily meant for recitals and memorable. They focus on themes such as the Prophet's virtues, his miracles, and the historical events surrounding his life. The *mawlid* poems, while not always considered the highest form of literary expression, are valued for their deep emotional resonance and their ability to unite people in worship. In addition to these prose compositions, there are poetic pieces that are sung by performers after each segment, with the segment being concluded by a repeated prayer, such as al-Manawi's: “O Lord, grant peace and blessings upon him, And forgive our sins, And with your mercy, cleanse us.” These poetic compositions are simple in their language and meanings; they are not of the finest literary quality, but their value lies in the profound impact they have on the popular communities.

There is no doubt that Muslims have long been interested in recording the life of the Prophet. However, the crafting of themes about his birth, prophecy, wives, and battles is largely the work of the Sufis, who used the story of his birth as a means to capture the hearts of people. Upon examining Sufi traditions, it becomes clear that they incorporated the *mawlid* deeply into religious life, making it an essential part of public celebrations.

The story is recited every Rabi' al-Awwal as per customs, and it is also recited on other occasions, such as congratulatory gatherings and weddings. Celebrating the *mawlid* became an official holiday in Egypt, largely due to Sufi promotion.

One of the earliest known works of this genre (*mawlid*) is *Al-'Arus* by Ibn al-Jawzi, who passed away in 597 AH, along with the treatise by Ibn Jabir al-Andalusi, who died in 780 AH, and the treatise by al-Ra'ini al-Gharnati, who died in 779 AH.

In the Egyptian National Library, there are around forty *mawlid* texts composed over various periods. If we were to examine them all, we would find that this type of composition became very widespread; each Sufi order has its own *mawlid*, and each sheikh has a specific *mawlid* text.

Poetic literature that speaks of the Prophet's birth, life, miracles, and beautiful practices is referred to as *Mawlid* literature. Tamil scholars have authored numerous *Mawlid*s in praise of the Prophet, with over 70 long *Mawlid*s composed (Zubair 2022). A *Mawlid* recounts the Prophet's noble birth, his miracles, and his beautiful lifestyle. Muslims are encouraged to know about the Prophet, follow his example, affirm his miracles, and emulate his actions. *Mawlid*s fulfill this purpose by inspiring Muslims to increase righteous deeds and express joy during the Prophet's birth month, with special attention paid to reciting the story of his holy birth (Zubair 2022).

In the lineage of such *Mawlid*s, the Tamil Muslim community reveres the following (Zubair 2022):

1. Subuhana Mawlid
2. Barzangi Mawlid
3. Hariri Mawlid
4. Sharaful Anam Mawlid
5. Manqoos Mawlid
6. Minhath Sarandeeb Mawlid

These *Mawlid*s celebrate the praises of the Prophet (PBUH). Among these, "Subuhana Mawlid" stands as the crown jewel, with historical records attributing its authorship to the learned Imam Ghazali or Imam-ul-Khatib Muhammad al-Madani. The title "Subuhana Mawlid" originates from its opening line, "Subuhana Azeez al-Ghaffar," thus taking its name from its first word. Whether in cities or small villages, from the huts of the poor to the palaces of the wealthy, this *Mawlid* is widely recited. Its purpose is to honor and exalt the Prophet (PBUH).

The Role of the *Mawlid* in Modern Society

The *mawlid* continues to be a central aspect of religious life for many Muslims around the world. In recent years, there has been a revival of interest in the *mawlid*, with new artistic forms being introduced. For example, the use of modern media, such as radio and television, has allowed *mawlid* performances to reach a broader audience, with well-known performers reciting the *mawlid* in front of large audiences. These performances often feature high levels of artistic production, incorporating elaborate stage designs and lighting arrangements. In this way, the *mawlid* is undergoing a process of modernization, adapting to the tastes and expectations of contemporary society while still retaining its spiritual significance.

Furthermore, the modern *mawlid* has become a vehicle for expressing cultural identity. In countries like Egypt and Tamil Nadu of India the *mawlid* is an important cultural event, transcending religious boundaries and becoming a part of the national

heritage. The *mawlid* is celebrated by people from all walks of life, regardless of their level of religious observance. It has thus become a symbol of the unity of the Muslim community and a means of celebrating the Prophet's life in a manner that resonates with the people.

CONCLUSION

The research concludes by summarizing the core findings and their significance, emphasizing the role of the Mawlid in Islamic culture as a reflection of deep love and respect for Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). These works, composed across cultures, underscore the diversity of Islamic traditions. Contributions from scholars in Egypt and Tamil Nadu have greatly enriched this genre, offering valuable insights into their reverence for the Prophet and the broader Islamic heritage. This work also acknowledges limitations in the study and suggests directions for further research. The *mawlid* is a unique and multifaceted tradition that embodies the interplay between religion, culture, and artistic expression. While it has evolved over the centuries, the core purpose of the *mawlid* remains unchanged: to honor and celebrate the life and legacy of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The *mawlid* continues to be a cherished event in the Islamic calendar, deeply ingrained in the hearts of millions of Muslims worldwide. Ultimately, the *mawlid* serves as a testament to the power of religious observance to adapt and thrive in different cultural and historical contexts, shaping the lives of individuals and communities while fostering a deep sense of devotion and identity. Mawlid is a form of veneration for the Prophet's legacy. It is also a form of seeking intercession and supplication within Sufism. Those who consider the musical and lyrical nature of its composition, fitting for singing and recitation.

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