

The Boundaries of Speech and the Aesthetics of Silence in Classical Arabic Poetry: An Inquiry into Virtuous Silence (Şamt)

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Abstract: This study examines the moral, intellectual, and rhetorical dimensions of virtuous silence (şamt) in classical Arabic poetry at the intersection of Arabic literature and the Islamic wisdom tradition. In ancient Arabic culture, where speech and eloquence were considered the primary indicators of social prestige, identity, and ultimate rhetoric, silence was conceptualized not as passive incapacity or muteness, but as a conscious moral discipline, an internal self-regulation, and a strategic protective shield. Spanning the literary heritage from the Pre-Islamic period to the Islamic and Abbasid eras, poets characterized the uncontrolled expenditure of speech, detached from prior reflection, as a realm of "bane" that exposes humans to irreversible ruin. Nourished by the Hadith tradition, Sufi teachings, and moral literature, this poetic vision positions silence as an insurmountable refuge against error, an aesthetic veil concealing ignorance and flaws, a hallmark of character maturity, and a source of dignity. The verses of prominent poets analyzed within the scope of this study reveal the profound connection between silence and the concepts of eloquence (balāghah) and conciseness (ījāz) in Arabic rhetorical theory. By condensing narratives that would otherwise span pages into a single instance of keeping silent, these poets transformed silence into the highest form of expression. Consequently, classical Arabic poets regarded the delicate balance between speech and silence as a fundamental moral principle, demonstrating that true wisdom lies not merely in eloquent speaking, but in recognizing the exact moment when silence serves as the most eloquent response..

Keywords: Classical Arabic Poetry, Şamt, Silence (Sukūt), Eloquence (Balāghah), Conciseness (Ījāz), Islamic Wisdom Tradition..

Introduction

Fundamentally serving as a direct reflection of life, Arabic poetry does not observe a hierarchical distinction among its subjects as major-minor or significant-insignificant. Although historical political, social, and cultural dynamics have occasionally rendered certain themes more prominent, this literary heritage, enduring since the Pre-Islamic (Jāhiliyyah) period, far transcends the boundaries of universal genres such as panegyric (*madīh*), satire (*hijā'*), elegy (*rithā'*), or love poetry (*ghazal*). Indeed, even the most minute elements, often overlooked by ordinary people, have been transformed into aesthetic poetic objects in the hands of poets. Consequently, poetry in Arabic culture is not merely a branch of art, but rather an exhaustive archive of collective memory and daily life. The well-known dictum in classical literature, "Poetry is the register (*diwan*) of the Arabs" (*al-shi'ru dīwānu al-'Arab*), explicitly elucidates this cultural phenomenon (Ibn Rashīq, 1981).

In Arabic culture, language and eloquence serve as a mirror in which personality is materialized. However, within this literary and cultural sphere, silence is just as functional as the spoken word (*lafz*). Indeed, the impact of an expression is directly correlated not only with the moment words are displayed, but also with bringing the speech to an end at the precise time. In this context, transforming silence into an aesthetic form is a rhetorical strategy that does not diminish the power of the word, but on the contrary, further reinforces it within the mind of the listener (Al-'Askarī, 1419 AH). In the Arabic language, two primary terms are utilized to denote the state of silence: *al-sukūt* (السكوت) and *al-ṣamt* (الصمت). Lexically, *al-sukūt* is employed in meanings such as "the opposite of speech, remaining silent, ceasing, becoming still, and refraining from speech deliberately or voluntarily despite possessing the capacity to speak. (Ibn Manẓūr, 1414 AH). While the term *al-ṣamt* shares the same meaning as *al-sukūt*, it incorporates an additional nuance, lexically defined as "prolonging the state of silence. (Ibn Manẓūr, 1414 AH; Al-Zabīdī, 1385–1422 AH).

Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī elucidates the distinction between these two terms as follows: "*Al-ṣamt* possesses a broader and more profound meaning than *al-sukūt*. This is because it can be used for both entities that lack the capacity for speech and those that possess this capacity yet choose not to speak. For this reason, entities devoid of the ability to speak are also referred to as *ṣāmit* and *muṣmit*. Conversely, *al-sukūt* is uttered exclusively for someone who possesses the ability to speak but refrains from utilizing this capability (Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, 2007). It is highly probable that the prophetic traditions (*ḥadīths*) exerted a profound influence on al-Iṣfahānī's distinction between these terms in this specific manner. Indeed, the Prophet stated in his traditions: "Whoever wishes to be pleased by attaining salvation should remain silent"; "Silence is the pinnacle of worship"; "Shall I inform you of the easiest form of worship and the lightest upon the body? It is silence and good character"; "Silence is the master of good manners"; "Silence is the adornment of the scholar and a veil for the ignorant (concealing their flaws)"; "It is incumbent upon you to observe prolonged silence. Verily, this repels Satan and aids you in worldly affairs"; "Wisdom consists of ten parts: nine are found in seclusion, and one is in silence"; "Remaining silent is wisdom, yet those who practice it are few"; and "Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day should either speak righteousness or keep silent. (Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, 1990) through these exhortations, [the Prophet] invested the term *al-ṣamt* with a distinct semantic and moral identity.

As can be observed, this corpus represents a broad semantic field shaped around the control of the tongue and the virtue of silence (*al-sukūt*) within Islamic ethical thought. Here, silence is conceptualized not merely as a state of refraining from speech, but as a moral discipline, a means for the cultivation of the soul (*nafs*), and a pathway to attaining wisdom. The fact that silence is defined in the texts alternatively as the pinnacle of worship, a central element of morality, an adornment for the scholar, and a veil for the ignorant indicates that it was perceived as a multi-layered virtue possessing both individual and social dimensions. Likewise, when all these traditions are considered collectively, the notion emerges that speech entails a profound responsibility and that abstaining from unnecessary discourse is an indicator of spiritual maturity. Within this framework, silence gains meaning not as a passive stillness, but as a conscious choice, an internal equilibrium, and a moral stance; consequently, the texts in question constitute a holistic conceptual domain that emphasizes the value of silence from various facets around this understanding. Indeed, in Sufism (*tasawwuf*), which is one of the foundational Islamic sciences, silence (*al-ṣamt*) has been designated as a matter of spiritual etiquette (*ādāb*) and is enumerated among the stations (*maqāmāt*) and spiritual states (*aḥwāl*) of the Sufis. (Al-Qushayrī, 2001).

Virtuous silence, conceptualized as *al-ṣamt* in classical Arabic ethical and adab literature, is not a

The Boundaries of Speech and the Aesthetics of Silence in Classical Arabic Poetry: An Inquiry into Virtuous Silence (Ṣamt)

passive muteness arising from an inability to speak. On the contrary, al-ṣamt serves as an intellectual barricade against the destruction caused by speech that has not passed through the filter of contemplation, a mechanism of egoic self-control, and an artistic armor that preserves the inherent value of discourse. It is inconceivable for such a concept to have escaped the notice of the poets. While some poets have addressed the ontological value, boundaries, equilibrium, and expressive beauty of al-ṣamt, others have articulated how this concept serves as a sanctuary and reflects human character. Consequently, within the framework of theories of wisdom, personality, ethics, and rhetoric (balāghah), this study examines the concept of al-ṣamt through the delicate balance that classical poets established between speech and silence.

The Boundaries of Speech: Seeking Refuge in Silence from the Banes of the Tongue

As in all cultures around the world, excessive speech is not deemed commendable in Arabic culture, where it is widely asserted that silence protects the individual from numerous negative consequences. Within the sapiential world of classical Arabic poetry, the tongue is recognized both as an elevating faculty that exalts human beings and as the sharpest weapon that can drag them toward catastrophe. Poets have characterized the uncontrolled expenditure of speech as a realm of "bane" (*āfah*) that threatens individual and social morality, exposing humans to irreversible ruin. When the boundaries of discourse are breached, an individual encounters not only condemnation and regret but also becomes the victim of a security vulnerability woven by their own hands. In the face of this circle of risk, classical poets have treated silence (*ṣamt*) not as an incapacity, but rather as a strategic and aesthetic sanctuary—a total protective shield. Nourished by the intellectual heritage of the Arabian Peninsula and Islamic civilization, this poetic vision regards remaining silent not as passive inaction, but on the contrary, as the manifestation of profound internal contemplation and mental regulation. Numerous poets have contextualized the concept of *ṣamt* as the adornment of the intellect, a veil concealing flaws, and the most secure path to preservation from error.

Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, one of the four Rightly Guided Caliphs (*al-Khulafā' al-Rāshidūn*), is among those who articulated this theme in the most exquisite manner. By contrasting the elegance engendered by concise speech with the weariness induced by excessive discourse, he aimed to visualize the aesthetic value of balanced speech within the mind. In the second couplet, it is emphasized that remaining silent is not a passive act, but on the contrary, a voluntary and active shield that protects the individual from error and condemnation. The renowned similes of silver, pearl, and ruby in the final couplet do not merely relegate silence to a method of protection; instead, they elevate it to the level of a moral adornment, a virtuous jewel. (‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, 2002).

مَمْقُوتٌ	كَثِيرُهُ	وَإِنْ	حَسَنٌ	بِأَهْلِهِ	الْقَلِيلُ	مِنْ	الْكَلَامِ
صَمُوتٌ	يُعَابٌ	وَمَا	يَزِلُّ	مُكْتَبِرٌ	صَمَتٍ	وَمَا	مِنْ
الْيَاقُوتُ	زَائَهُ	دُرٌّ	فَالصَّمْتُ	فَضَّةٌ	يَنْطِقُ	نَاطِقًا	مِنْ

Indeed, brevity in speech is graceful for those who practice it, while excessive talk is detested.

The silent man never stumbles, whereas the talkative always slips; and blame never finds the quiet soul.

If speech were fashioned out of silver, silence would be a pearl embellished with rubies.

The catastrophes that the tongue can cause and the elegance attained through silence are among the most frequently treated themes. The tongue is the most critical organ determining an individual's reputation and even their very existence in social life. The following couplets, while drawing attention to the dangers of untimely and immoderate speech, counsel adhering to silence, which is the adornment of the intellect. Through a striking antithesis, the poet demonstrates that wounds inflicted by a physical fall can heal, whereas an error caused by a slip of the tongue can drag a person toward spiritual or worldly ruin (death) (‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, 2002).

وَأَدْمِنُ	عَلَى	الصَّمَتِ	الْمَزِينِ	لِلْعَقْلِ	فَلَا	تُكْثِرَنَّ	الْقَوْلَ
وَلَيْسَ	يَمُوتُ	الْمَرْءُ	مِنْ	عَثْرَةِ	الزَّجَلِ	الْفَتَى	مِنْ
						بِلِسَانِهِ	عَثْرَةِ

Do not speak excessively at an inappropriate time, and make a habit of silence, which is the adornment of the intellect.

A young man may perish from a slip of his tongue, yet a person does not die from a slip of his foot.

Speech is sometimes characterized as a disease that spiritually and intellectually poisons human

beings. An individual's desire to respond to every word and engage in every dispute can transform into a soul-wearying warfare. The following couplets defend the nobility of withdrawing into one's own shell, staying clear of unnecessary arguments and hurtful arrows. Rather than catching the spiritual illnesses and chaos triggered by discourse, the poet prefers to remain within the tranquility brought by silence; for instead of living with the wounds inflicted by the tongue, remaining within the dignity of silence is a far more auspicious path of well-being for a human being. Abū Nuwās, the renowned poet of the Abbasid period, expressed this situation as follows (Ibn Qutayba al-Dīnawarī, 1998):

خَلَّ	جَنِّبَكَ	لِرَامٍ	وَأَمْضِ	عَنْهُ	بِسَلَامٍ
مُتَّ	بِذَاءٍ	الصَّمْتِ	خَيْرٌ	لَكَ	مِنْ دَاءِ الْكَلَامِ

Step aside from the archer [who aims at you], and pass him by in peace.

To perish from the malady of silence is far better for you than to suffer from the sickness of speech.

Within the Islamic literary and sapiential tradition, the elegance of silence and measured speech has always been emphasized as much as the power of the word. Mastering one's tongue is recognized as the key to salvation for an individual's both worldly and otherworldly affairs. The following couplet, while revealing the distinction between hollow words lacking depth and profound discourse filled with knowledge and gnosis (*'irfān*), reminds us that the path to attaining liberation and tranquility lies in speaking accurately and silently, without squandering words. Al-Ma'arrī expressed this situation as follows (al-Ma'arrī, 1924).

الْزَمِ	الصَّمْتَ	إِنْ	أَرَدْتَ	نَجَاةً	لَيْسَ ضَخْخَاخٌ
					مِثْلَ غَمْرِ

Cling to silence if you desire salvation, for a shallow utterance is never like an ocean of profound speech.

In these couplets, al-Ma'arrī emphasizes the pseudo-superiority of materialism over nobility and underscores how excessive speech undermines the sincerity of an individual's words; thereby, he counsels seeking refuge within the protective shield of wisdom and silence (al-Ma'arrī, 1924).

كُنْ	مَنْ	تَشَاءُ	مُهْجَنًا	أَوْ	خَالِصًا
وَاصْنُتْ	فَمَا	كَثُرَ	الْكَلَامُ	مِنْ	أَمْرِي

Be whoever you wish—of mixed lineage or pure; Once you are blessed with wealth, you are the master.

And stay silent, for whenever a man speaks too much, he is surely thought to be exaggerating.

In another poem, al-Ma'arrī underscores that silence constitutes the safest harbor in the face of the jolting surprises of fate (*falak*), highlights how speech is distorted as it is carried from ear to ear, and emphasizes that no matter how much individuals rely on their intellect, divine destiny and sustenance (*rizq*) ultimately reign supreme beyond it (al-Ma'arrī, 1924).

الصَّمْتُ	أَوْلَى	وَمَا	رَجُلٌ	مُمَنِّعَةٌ	إِلَّا
وَالنَّقْلُ	غَيْرُ	أَنْبَاءٍ	سَمِعَتْ	بِهَا	وَأَفَةُ
وَالْعُثْلُ	زَيْنٌ	وَلَكِنْ	فَوْقَهُ	قَدَرٌ	فَمَا لَهُ

Silence is safer, for no step is so firmly guarded that the vicissitudes of time cannot make it stumble.

And rumors altered the news I had once heard; Indeed, the ruin of speech lies in distorting it by lessening or adding.

Intellect is an ornament, yet destiny reigns above it, for it holds no sway over the seeking of one's sustenance.

Ali ibn Hishām addresses the vital role of patience, dignity (*hilm*), and controlled silence within an individual's process of moral maturation. While noting that dignity is an acquired virtue that adorns the human being, he emphasizes that remaining silent in moments of ignorance or incapacity serves as the safest sanctuary that protects the individual from regret (Al-Ibshīhī, 1999).

The Boundaries of Speech and the Aesthetics of
Silence in Classical Arabic Poetry: An Inquiry into
Virtuous Silence (Ṣamt)

لَعَمْرُكَ إِنَّ الْجُمَّ رَيْنٌ لِأَهْلِهِ	وَمَا الْجُمُّ إِلَّا عَادَةٌ وَتَحَلُّمٌ
إِذَا لَمْ يَكُنْ صَمْتُ الْفَتَى عَنْ نَدَامَةٍ	وَعَيَّ قَبْلَ الصَّمْتِ أَوَّلَى وَأَسْلَمٌ

By your life, forbearance is indeed an adornment for its possessor and forbearance is nothing but a habit and a conscious effort to be patient.

If a young man's silence does not stem from a past regret or from an inability to express oneself, then remaining silent is far better and safer.

Another poet emphasizes that silence is a secure companion that protects an individual from dangers and functions as a shield against the catastrophes that the tongue can engender. He notes that remaining silent enables one to live in peace, imparts wisdom, and serves as the most loyal guardian protecting the individual from slips of the tongue during moments when they find it difficult to express themselves (Shaykhū, 1913).

الصَّمْتُ لِلْمَرْءِ خَلِيفٌ السَّلَامُ	وَشَاهِدٌ لَهُ بِفَضْلِ الْخُفِّ
وَحَارِسٌ مِنْ زَلَلِ اللِّسَانِ	فِي الْقَوْلِ إِنَّ عَيَّ عَنِ التَّيَانِ

Silence is an ally of peace for a man, and a witness to his excellence in wisdom.

And it is a guardian against the slips of the tongue in speech, should one find himself unable to clarify his meaning.

Another poet acknowledges that eloquent speech adorns an individual; however, he argues that instead of immoderate speech which may lead to error, choosing a dignified silence is far more noble and secure ('Abd al-Raḥīm, 2000).

الصَّمْتُ خَيْرٌ لِّلْفَتَى	مِنْ مُنْطِقٍ خَطِلٍ يُشِيرُهُ
وَلَصَمْتُهُ أُخْرَى بِهِ	وَلَوْ أَنَّ مَنْطِقَهُ يَرِيْنُهُ

Silence is far better for a young man than a reckless and flawed speech that disgraces him.

And remaining silent is much more fitting for him, even if his eloquent speech were otherwise to adorn him.

In the face of the errors, insincerities, and mind-clouding verbiage that the tongue can cause, silence serves both as a shield protecting the individual and as a badge of maturity that conceals flaws in social relations. The following couplet, while emphasizing the protective and gainful aspects of remaining silent, functions as a timeless warning against the dangers of aberration and deception brought about by immoderate speech ('Abd al-Raḥīm, 2000).

الصَّمْتُ غَنَمٌ لِأَقْوَامٍ وَمَسْتَرَّةٌ	وَالْقَوْلُ فِي بَعْضِهِ التَّضْلِيلُ وَالْفَقْدُ
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Silence is a gain for some communities and a protective veil [over faults], while within speech lies, at times, misguidance and fallacy.

The tongue is both an individual's greatest strength and their most vulnerable domain. In the face of the power of words to drag a person into regret, speaking reflectively and choosing silence when necessary are considered the most fundamental indicators of maturity. The following couplets, while emphasizing the importance of foreweighing the consequences of words to be spoken, remind us that instead of any discourse that yields no benefit, leads to condemnation, and has not passed through the filter of reason, silence is a far more effortless and noble sanctuary ('Abd al-Raḥīm, 2000).

لَيْسَ كَانَ يَجْنِي اللُّؤْمَ مَا أَنْتَ قَائِلٌ	وَلَمْ يَكْ مِنْهُ النَّفْعُ فَالصَّمْتُ أَيْسَرُ
فَلَا تُبْدِ قَوْلًا مِنْ لِسَانِكَ لَمْ يُرْضَ	مَوَاقِعُهُ مِنْ قَبْلِ ذَاكَ التَّفَكُّرُ

If what you are about to say will only reap blame and bring no benefit, then silence is far easier.

Therefore, let not your tongue utter a word whose consequences have not been approved by prior reflection.

The legitimacy of speech is contingent upon the principle of justice and the condition of not leading

to sin. Any discourse that lacks a sense of responsibility places a moral liability upon the individual, both in this world and the hereafter. The following couplet, while emphasizing that remaining silent is an auspicious sanctuary protecting human beings from sin, reminds us that when the need to speak arises, adhering strictly to justice, truthfulness, and moderation constitutes an absolute moral imperative ('Abd al-Raḥīm, 2000).

وَأَلْصَقْتُ خَيْرَ مَنْ كَلِمَ بِمَائِمٍ	فَكُنْ صَامِتًا تَسْلَمُ وَإِنْ قُلْتَ فَاعْدِلْ
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Indeed, silence is far better than speech that carries sin; so remain silent to be safe, and if you must speak, be just.

The greatest spiritual burden the tongue can engender is the regret born of words that have been spoken and are now impossible to retract. Within the Islamic sapiential tradition, silence has been envisioned as a safe harbor protecting human beings from falling into error. The following couplets, while addressing the anxiety and fear that excessive speech awakens within the human soul, vividly warn of how immense a security it is to seek refuge in the tranquility of silence before one ever speaks, thereby forestalling deep future remorse and the self-reproach of "if only I had not spoken." Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allāh ibn Zanjī al-Baghdādī expressed this situation as follows (Ibn Hibbān, 2017):

أَنْتَ مَنْ الصَّمْتِ آمِنُ الزَّلَلِ	وَمَنْ كَثِيرِ الْكَلَامِ فِي وَجَلِ
لَا تَقُلْ الْقَوْلَ ثُمَّ تَتْبَعُهُ	يَا لَيْتَ مَا كُنْتُ قُلْتُ لَمْ أَقُلْ

Through silence you are secure from error, while through excessive speech you remain in constant dread.

Do not utter a word that you will later pursue with the regret, 'Oh, I wish I had not said what I said!'

Testing Intellect and Character: Silence as a Veil for Ignorance

An individual's inner world, morality, and intellectual capacity seep into the external world through words. Within the ancient tradition of wisdom, speech has been regarded as the most transparent mirror revealing a person's character and rational maturity. The moment an individual speaks, they expose to their interlocutor not only the accumulation of their mind but also their ignorance and deficiencies. Precisely at this juncture, silence functions not merely as a state of inaction, but as a strategic protective shield and an aesthetic veil that safeguards human intellect and character, concealing the inadequacy of the unlearned. For a person to maintain their silence on a matter they do not know or possess mastery over prevents their ignorance from being noticed by others. In this respect, remaining silent serves both as a reputable "booty" (*ghanimah*) that prevents the erosion of reputation in social relations and as a protective "veil" drawn over intellectual inadequacies. While letting the tongue loose uncontrollably instantly diminishes the weight of character and renders lack of quality visible, a well-timed and measured silence constructs a well-intentioned perception of wisdom and dignity in the minds of interlocutors. Consequently, by enveloping the destructive effects of ignorance, silence stands as the most effortless station of nobility, offering the individual an opportunity to re-weigh and mature their intellect and character.

Zuhayr ibn Abi Sulmā, one of the renowned poets of the Pre-Islamic (*Jāhiliyyah*) period, addressed this concept in one of his wisdom-themed poems. In these couplets, it is emphasized that internal and mental value holds greater importance against the deceptiveness of an individual's outward appearance. The poet underscores that a human being's true worth manifests only through their speech, and that the essential elements making a human truly human are their tongue (the capacity for expression) and their heart (intellectual discernment); beyond these, the physical body amounts to nothing more than a mass of flesh and bone (Al-Durrah, 1989).

وَكَايْنُ نَرَى مَنْ صَامِتٍ لَكَ مُعْجَبٍ	زِيَادَتُهُ أَوْ نَقْصُهُ فِي النَّكَمِ
إِنْسَانُ الْفَتَى نِصْفٌ وَنِصْفٌ فُرَادُهُ	قَلَمَ يَبْقَى إِلَّا صُورَةُ اللَّحْمِ وَالْذَّمِ

How often you see a silent man who admires you, yet his true worth—whether his greatness or his deficiency—is revealed only when he speaks.

A young man is but half a tongue and half a heart; and naught remains besides them but the mere form of flesh

and blood.

Virtues such as honesty, trustworthiness, and silence are the most precious capitals an individual accumulates for both the hereafter and worldly life. The following couplet characterizes remaining silent not as a mundane state of stillness, but as a spiritual realm of commerce where wise individuals generate value and secure gains. Imām al-Shāfiʿī emphasizes that an individual who invests in the capital of silence by keeping their tongue under control will attain a far higher station and prestige than all other merchants (speakers) who squander their words (Al-Suyūṭī, 2010).

وَمَا الصَّمْتُ إِلَّا فِي الرِّجَالِ مَتَاجِرٌ	وَتَاجِرُهُ يَبْلُغُو عَلَى كُلِّ تَاجِرٍ
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Silence among men is nothing but a realm of commerce, and the merchant of silence reigns supreme over all other traders.

Another poet emphasizes that silence or remaining mute should not be construed as a state of helplessness; on the contrary, he underscores that it is a form of nobility that safeguards the individual from error, rejuvenates the soul, and at times, delivers the most potent response (ʿAbd al-Raḥīm, 2000).

أَسْنُرُ الْغَيَّ مَا اسْتَظَعْتُ بِصَمْتٍ	إِنَّ فِي الصَّمْتِ رَاحَةً لِلصَّمُوتِ
وَأَقْبِلِ الصَّمْتَ إِنْ غَيَّبَتْ جَوَاباً	رُبَّ قَوْلٍ جَوَابُهُ فِي السُّكُوتِ

Indeed, in silence there is comfort for the quiet soul; many a word finds its best answer in remaining silent.

Conceal your inability to speak with silence as much as you can; and accept silence if you find yourself at a loss for an answer.

One of those who composed poetry on this subject is Abu Yūsuf, one of the founding imams of the schools of law (*madhāhib*). The Great Imam explained through a philosophical discourse that "speech" is the most significant element betraying an individual's intellect or ignorance. While expressing astonishment at an ignorant person exposing their own flaws by speaking, he emphasizes that silence is a veil concealing inadequacy, and that the silence of a wise person—who in fact knows perfectly well how to speak—constitutes a true nobility (Al-Suyūṭī, 2010).

عَجِبْتُ لِإِزْرَاءِ الْغَيِّ بِنَفْسِهِ	وَصَمْتُ الَّذِي قَدْ كَانَ بِالْقَوْلِ أَعْلَمَا
وَفِي الصَّمْتِ سِتْرٌ لِلْغَيِّ وَإِنَّمَا	صَحِيفَةُ لُبِّ الْمَرْءِ أَنْ يَتَكَلَّمَا

I marvel at the fool who brings disgrace upon himself, and at the silence of the one who is the most knowledgeable in speech.

In silence, there is a veil of cover for the fool; yet, it is through speech that the true pages of a man's intellect are revealed.

Another poet, while stating that excessive speech inevitably drags an individual into error, characterizes silence as a priceless value, akin to gold and jewelry in comparison to silver. He expressed that remaining silent or speaking little is a virtue protecting the individual from error as follows (ʿAbd al-Raḥīm, 2000):

مَا زَلَّ ذُو صَمْتٍ وَمَا مِنْ مُكْثِرٍ	إِلَّا يَزِلُّ وَمَا يُغَابُ صَمُوتٌ
إِنْ كَانَ مُنْطِقٌ نَاطِقٍ مِنْ فَضَّةٍ	فَالصَّمْتُ ذُرٌّ زَانَهُ يَأْفُوتُ

The silent one does not slip, whereas no talkative person exists but slips; and a quiet man is never blamed.

If the speech of a speaker is made of silver, then silence is a pearl adorned with rubies.

In the following couplets, it is observed that silence, as the manifestation of wisdom and dignity, is praised, and the deep relationship between the intellect and the tongue is addressed. While stating that silence confers respectability upon an individual, the poet demonstrates through a highly succinct antithesis that a wise person thinks before speaking, whereas an ignorant person speaks without thinking (Al-Saqqaf, 2012):

مَنْ لَزِمَ الصَّمْتَ اكْتَسَى هَيْبَةً	تُخْفِي عَنِ النَّاسِ قَسَاوِيهَ
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لِسَانُ مَنْ يَعْقُلُ فِي قَلْبِهِ	وَقَلْبُ مَنْ يَجْهَلُ فِي فِيهِ
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Whoever clings to silence is clothed in dignity, which conceals his shortcomings from the people.

The tongue of the wise resides in his heart, while the heart of the ignorant resides in his mouth.

These couplets have been penned with a wise approach that counsels an individual's posture in communication and the correct utilization of the power of words. While stating that remaining silent is far more auspicious than falling into error, the poet expresses that instead of a passive muteness, a "conscious silence" that listens to what is said with undivided attention renders the individual far more distinguished and noble ('Abd al-Raḥīm, 2000).

وَالصَّمْتُ خَيْرٌ عَلَى عَيْهِ	مَنْ النُّطْقُ تَلَزَمَ فِيهِ الْخَطَا
فَكُنْ صَامِتًا وَاعِيًا مَا يُقَالُ	فَذَلِكَ أَجْدَى وَأَعْلَى سَنَا

Indeed, silence with all its speechlessness is better than a speech that inevitably binds you to error.

So be silent, yet mindfully aware of what is being said; for that is far more beneficial and loftier in eminence.

Balāghah and Ījāz: Silence as the Ultimate Form of Expression

Eloquence (*balāghah*), known in literary arts as the art of expressing words in the most potent, fitting, and flawless manner, and conciseness (*ījāz*), the skill of conveying profoundly deep meanings with minimal words, constitute the pinnacles of classical literature. However, these two concepts are not confined solely to the words that fall from the tongue. Poets and thinkers have transformed silence into the ultimate form of expression by encapsulating an exposition that would otherwise take pages into a single, profound pause (Akbaş, 2017).

In Arabic rhetorical theory, *ījāz* (conciseness)—the art of expressing the maximum meaning with the minimum number of words—stands as the zenith of silence. While Abū al-'Atāhiyah declares that whoever manages to remain silent attains absolute salvation, he posits that silence sometimes offers a language of exposition (*ījāz*) that is far more brief and succinct than speech itself. (al-Saffārīnī, 1993):

قَدْ أَقْلَحَ السَّالِمُ الصَّمُوتُ	كَلَامُ دَاعِي الْكَلَامِ قُوتُ
مَا كُلُّ نُطْقٍ لَهُ جَوَابُ	جَوَابُ مَا يُخَرِّهُ السُّكُوتُ
يَا عَجِبًا لِأَمْرِي ظُلُومُ	مُسْتَيَقِنٌ أَنَّهُ يَمُوتُ

The safe and silent one has surely succeeded; while the speech of one who invites talk is but his mere sustenance.

Not every utterance deserves an answer; the best reply to that which is detestable is remaining silent.

How astonishing is the wrongdoing man, who oppresses others while knowing with absolute certainty that he will die!

In another poem, Abū al-'Atāhiyah addresses one of the greatest paradoxes in the human endeavor for self-expression. The poet argues that people sometimes drown in words in the name of speaking briefly and succinctly, whereas silence itself constitutes the most concise and clear message *par excellence*. According to the premise here, it is impossible for an individual who cannot master the nobility of remaining silent and discerning where to stand to reach an impressive conclusion or leave the right impression upon their interlocutor through speech ('Abd al-Raḥīm, 2000).

يَخُوضُ أَنَاثُ فِي الْكَلَامِ لِيُوجِزُوا	وَالصَّمْتُ فِي بَعْضِ الْأَحْيَانِ أَوْجَزُ
إِذَا كُنْتُ عَنْ أَنْ تُحْسِنَ الصَّمْتُ عَاجِزًا	فَأَلَيْتُ عَنِ الْإِبْلَاحِ فِي الْقَوْلِ أَعْجَزُ

People plunge into speech in order to be brief, yet at times, remaining silent is the briefest eloquence of all.

If you are incapable of mastering the art of silence, then you are utterly powerless to achieve true eloquence in speech.

The following lines whisper a profound philosophical quest regarding the nature of time and

The Boundaries of Speech and the Aesthetics of Silence in Classical Arabic Poetry: An Inquiry into Virtuous Silence (Ṣamt)

humanity. While al-Ma'arrī argues that escaping the burden of words renders silence the most potent form of expression (*ijāz*), he simultaneously invites humanity to a universal moral responsibility. A concept of pure goodness, purified from worldly expectations and seeking its recompense solely from the Creator, constitutes the heart of these brief yet jarring couplets (al-Ma'arrī, 1924).

أَوْجَزَ	الذَّهْرُ	فِي	الْمَقَالِ	إِلَى	أَنْ	جَعَلَ	الصَّمْتُ	غَايَةً	الْإِجَازَ
إِفَاعِلَ	الْخَيْرِ	إِنْ	جَزَاكَ	الْفَنَى	عِنْدَ	هُوَ	وَالْأَلَا	فَاللَّهُ	بِالْخَيْرِ جَازَ

Time shortened its speech to the point that it made silence the ultimate form of brevity.

So do good deeds! If a person rewards you for it, so be it; otherwise, God is the One who rewards with goodness.

In the following couplets, the poet addresses mournful silence—one of the heaviest states of the human soul—through an aesthetic and profound perspective. According to him, the silence of an individual burdened with grief is no ordinary muteness; rather, it is a form of expression harboring concealed laments and potent meanings within. This silence leaves impressions deeper than even the most beautiful melodies and directly permeates the human soul. The poet thus underscores that at moments when words prove inadequate, silence can transform into the most powerful vehicle of expression (‘Abd al-Rahīm, 2000).

وَلَرُبَّ	صَمْتُ	مِنْ	شَجِيٍّ	مُوجِعٍ	جَمَعَ	النِّيَّانَ	وَشَفَّ	عَنْ	مَكُونٍ
صَمْتُ	الْكَنِيْبِ	يَنَالُ	مِنْ	نَفْسِ	الْفَنَى	مَا	لَا	يَنَالُ	مُعَرَّدٌ بُلْحُونِ

How often a wounded, grieving silence has spoken volumes and disclosed the heart's secret depths.

The silence of the melancholy touches a person's soul more deeply than any songbird's sweetest tune can reach.

The Balance Between Speech and Silence: Poetic Etiquette and Wisdom

In Eastern and Islamic aesthetic traditions, remaining silent at the right place and time is as much a matter of morality, decorum (*adab*), and wisdom as is speech. Poetic etiquette demands from the poet not only to arrange words with the precision of a lapidary but also to employ the profound void where words end—namely, silence—as an element of expression. The "balance between speech and silence" is the most delicate scale reflecting the maturity of an individual's inner world; for while unrefined souls constantly speak in an attempt to conceal their inner emptiness, gnostic and sorrowful hearts manifest the deepest truths through silence. A wise silence possesses a far more potent, jarring, and transformative impact than an eloquence that would span pages or the most flawless melodies. Poetry that observes this equilibrium becomes a valley of contemplation (*tafakkur*), rendering the voice of silence audible and inviting the individual to listen to their own inner voice

‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib addresses the etiquette of speech within a congregation and the protective power of silence that conceals an individual's flaws. According to the poet, interjecting in a gathering without being asked a question is an unseemly behavior; conversely, remaining silent serves as a strategic shield that protects an individual's prestige and value within society by veiling these deficiencies, even if the person is in fact ignorant or uncultivated. (‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, 2002).

لَا	تَبْدَأَنَّ	بِمَنْطِقِي	فِي	مَجْلِسٍ	قَبْلَ	السُّؤَالِ	فَإِنَّ	ذَلِكَ	يَسْتَعِجُّ
فَالصَّمْتُ	يُحْسِنُ	كُلَّ	ظَرْفٍ	بِالْفَنَى	وَلَعَلَّهُ	خَرَقَ	سَفِيَهَ	أَرْقَعَ	

Never initiate speech in a gathering before being asked, for doing so is deemed unseemly and offensive.

For silence clothes a young man in the best of assumptions, even though he might actually be foolish, ignorant, and clumsy.

Regarding this matter, Imam al-Shāfi‘ī emphasizes the value of attaining the essence of discourse by avoiding its loquacity, and underscores that silence, which veils the flaws of untimely speech, renders an individual far more noble than engaging in misplaced talk (Al-Suyūṭī, 2010).

لَا	خَيْرَ	فِي	حَشْوِ	الْكَلَا	مِ	إِذَا	اهْتَدَيْتَ	إِلَى	عُبُونِهِ
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وَالصَّمْتُ أَجْمَلُ	بِالْفَتَى	مَنْ	مُنْطَقٍ	فِي	غَيْرِ	جِينِهِ
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There is no good in the padding of words once you have found your way to the very core of speech.

Silence is far more beautiful for a young man than speaking at an inappropriate time.

In these couplets, ‘Abdullāh ibn al-Mubārak addresses the two fundamental virtues that most elevate a young person’s character and morality: namely, remaining silent at the right time and speaking only the truth without resorting to oaths. He underscores that untimely speech humiliates the individual, and that what preserves the value of speech is not the abundance of oaths, but rather the intrinsic honesty of the person (Al-Dhahabī, 2001).

الصَّمْتُ أَجْمَلُ	بِالْفَتَى	مَنْ	مُنْطَقٍ	فِي	غَيْرِ	جِينِهِ
وَالصِّدْقُ أَجْمَلُ	بِالْفَتَى	فِي	الْقَوْلِ	عِنْدِي	مِنْ	يَمِينِهِ

Silence is far more beautiful for a young man than speaking at an inappropriate time.

And truthfulness is far more beautiful for a young man, in my view, than backing up his words with oaths.

Another poet, on the other hand, emphasizes that although silence is a safe haven, speaking out becomes an imperative at moments when the truth and reality manifest themselves clearly. He states that when the right path appears, one must speak courageously without faltering; however, when it is feared that the words to be spoken will bring harm or regret, clinging firmly to silence is the most prudent and vital precaution (‘Abd al-Rahīm, 2000).

لَا تَتْرَكَنَّ الصَّمْتَ حُكْمًا إِذَا بَدَا	لَكَ الرُّشْدُ وَانْطِقْ فِيهِ غَيْرَ مُجْمَمٍ
وَلَكِنْ إِذَا مَا الصَّمْتُ كَانَ حَرَامَةً	وَحَفَّتْ وَبَالَ الْقَوْلِ فَالصَّمْتُ فَأَلْزَمَ

Never choose silence when the right path has become clear to you; speak out concerning it, without any hesitation or stammering.

But whenever remaining silent serves as a form of prudence and caution, and you fear the evil consequences of speech, then hold fast to silence.

Ṣāliḥ ibn ‘Abd al-Quddūs expressed that silence is not merely an act of muteness, but also a virtue reflecting an individual’s intrinsic maturity and dignity. However, this silence does not imply a passive submission; whenever an individual stands up to oppose an injustice or to defend a claim, they must speak solely on behalf of righteousness and truth (‘Abd al-Rahīm, 2000).

أَطْلِ الصَّمْتَ فَإِنَّ الصَّمْتَ جَلَمٌ	وَإِذَا قُمْتَ فَيَالْحَقِّ فَقُمْ
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Prolong your silence, for silence is indeed a sign of forbearance; but whenever you stand to speak, stand only for the sake of truth.

In the following couplet, on the other hand, it is reminded that an individual’s restraining of their tongue is the safest path to preserving both social dignity and inner peace (‘Abd al-Rahīm, 2000).

أَطْلِ الصَّمْتَ إِذَا لَمْ تُسْأَلْ	إِنَّ فِي الصَّمْتِ لَأَقْوَامَ سَعَةٍ
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Indeed, in silence there is a vast refuge (and peace) for some people, maintain your silence if you have not been questioned.

These couplets reflect an understanding of moral wisdom that counsels an individual to be careful, measured, and prudent in speech. Emphasizing that words uttered thoughtlessly can yield unexpected consequences, the poet draws attention to the importance of remaining silent and weighing one’s words before speaking. Furthermore, by stating that one should not succumb to the idle and futile discourse of people, he invites the reader to dignity and discretion. In this respect, the couplets eloquently articulate the principle of “guarding the tongue,” which is one of the foundational virtues of classical Arabic adab literature (Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, 1981).

The Boundaries of Speech and the Aesthetics of Silence in Classical Arabic Poetry: An Inquiry into Virtuous Silence (Şamt)

أَيُّهَا	الْمَرْءُ	لَا	تَقُولَنَّ	قَوْلًا	أَسْنَتَ	تَنْدَرِي	مَاذَا	يَجِيبُكَ	مِنْهُ
وَأَخْزَنَ	الْقَوْلَ	إِنَّ	فِي	الصَّمْتِ	حُكْمًا	وَإِذَا	أَنْتَ	قُلْتَ	قَوْلًا
وَإِذَا	النَّاسُ	أَكْثَرُوا	فِي	حَدِيثٍ	لَيْسَ	مِمَّا	يَرْيَهُهُمْ	فَالَهُ	عَنْهُ

O man, do not utter a word, for you know not what consequences it might bring upon you.

Guard your speech, for indeed in silence lies wisdom; and if you must speak a word, weigh it carefully.

And if people indulge excessively in a discourse that does not grace them, then turn away and disregard it.

Conclusion

In classical Arabic poetry, *şamt* (virtuous silence) is not a state of deprivation arising from the inadequacy of language and discourse; on the contrary, it is an aesthetic and moral stance of superiority that preserves the very value of the word. Across a broad literary spectrum spanning from Zuhayr ibn Abī Sulmā to al-Ma‘arrī, poets have positioned silence as the armor of intellect, the veil of ignorance, the most concise form (*ijāz*) of eloquence, and a universal language of manifestation expressing the soul's profound griefs. In conclusion, within the aesthetics of classical Arabic poetry, precisely where the "boundaries of the word" end, the artistic and wise world of silence begins.

This study demonstrates that within the framework of classical Arabic poetry and the Islamic tradition of wisdom (*hikmah*), the concept of "virtuous silence" (*şamt*) is not merely a passive state of muteness representing the absence of speech, but rather an active stance rooted in profound moral, intellectual, and rhetorical foundations. In ancient Arabic culture, where speech, oratory, and eloquence were regarded as a mirror of personality and a marker of social prestige, poets characterized unthoughtful, untimely, and immoderate words as a "malady of the tongue" that leads to individual and social decay. The analysis conducted through the couplets of various poets—in addition to thinkers and poets such as Hazrat Ali, Zuhayr b. Abi Sulma, Abu Nuwas, Imam Shafi'i, Abu Yusuf, and Abu al-Atahiya—proves that silence functions as an insurmountable refuge protecting individuals from future regrets and as an aesthetic veil that conceals ignorance.

Another major conclusion reached by the study is that the concept of silence (*şamt*) is directly linked to eloquence in Arabic rhetorical theory, and specifically to the concept of *ijāz*—the art of expressing the maximum amount of meaning through the minimum number of words. Evading the burden and clutter of words, classical poets compressed ideas that could span pages into the depth of a single silence, transforming a sorrowful, wise, or strategic quietude into the highest and most potent form of expression. Ultimately, in this conceptual atlas constructed by classical Arabic poetry, the delicate balance between speech and silence is positioned as the most fundamental metric of a mature personality and intellectual reflection. The universal message of this literary tradition that reaches down to the present day is that true wisdom and literary maturity manifest not only in speaking effectively, but also in knowing when to remain silent.

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