

# Cosmogenesis of Arabic Literary Criticism: A Conundrum among the Connoisseurs

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**Abstract:** The whole gamut of man's intellectual endeavours oscillates and vacillates between science and non-science. The hallmark of science is embedded in the fact that it exploits systematic and empirical approaches to study the natural world. It is an objective, experimental research which is devoid of personal feelings, opinions or emotions; but rather based entirely on unbiased, impartial, value free and factual evidence. When we say, for example: water boils and freezes at 212 and 32 degrees Fahrenheit respectively, it connotes objective temperatures when water transforms from fluxive state to gaseous and solid forms respectively. The statement can be quantified, tested and proved over and over again. Non-science, on the other hand, is a perspective that is based on personal opinions or emotion. It is preponderantly characterized by subjectivity. It plays vital roles in a wide range of human activities that are not based on scientific experimental research method. These include religion, philosophy, arts and literature; and by extension, criticism, with which it shares intrinsic nexus as they are inextricably interwoven. Little or no wonder, then, that the actual point of birth or emergence of Arabic literary criticism has metamorphosed into a conundrum that has pitted eminent Arab literary virtuosos against one another. The eccentricity of views and heterogeneousness of opinions among four illustrious Arab belletrists has culminated into the emergence of four distinct schools of thought concerning the emergence of Arabic criticism. These schools and their exponents constitute the core and kernel of this paper; exploiting descriptive, historical and analytical methods of dissecting the anatomy of my specimen.

**Keywords:** Arabs, belletrists, experimental, literary criticism, non-science, science.

## I. Prolegomenon

The word criticism which is derived from the Greek noun *Krites / Kritikos* – meaning a judge of literature<sup>1</sup> is a term broadly used to cover the whole field of literary appreciation, analysis, comparison and judgement on the practical as well as theoretical sides of literary work..

### Evolution and metamorphosis of literary criticism

#### (i) Among the Greeks

Literary criticism began shortly after 800 BC in ancient Greece, during the era of the great Homeric epics – the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as well as the poets Hesiod and Sappho.<sup>2</sup> A very rudimentary form of literary criticism may perhaps be discerned already in Homer and Hesiod both of whom regard poetry the product of divine inspiration.<sup>3</sup> A few literary pronouncements are scattered through the odes of Pindar and the philosophers Xenophanes and Heraclitus, both of whom find fault with the passages of Homer.<sup>4</sup> These sketchy literary comments probably mark the beginning of literary criticism among the Greeks in the early periods.

The classical period which lasted between 500 and 323 BC witnessed the emergence of the tragedies of Euripides, Aeschylus and Sophocles as well as the comedies of Aristophanes. With Aristophanes, Greek literary criticism takes a new form. In most of his eleven extant plays, the writers and thinkers of his own age and of the immediately preceding age figure, often prominently, among the objects of his satire. In *The Clouds*, for example, he takes Socrates as the leading representative of the New Learning of the day, and by the method

of *reduction ad absurdum*, makes fun of him and of his techniques of argument and instruction. However, Euripides is the principal object of Aristophanes literary satire.<sup>5</sup>

With Plato, a discerning critic in both poetry and drama, we entered a different world of literary criticism. He was the first critic to examine poetry as a part of his moral philosophy. As a great disciple of Socrates, his literary judgements are scattered in the *Socratic Dialogues*. In *The Ion*, he advocated poetry as a genuine piece of imaginative literature, but in *The Republic* which is a treatise on his concept of Ideal State, he rejected poetry on moral and philosophical ground.<sup>6</sup>

Another prominent figure in the history and development of literary criticism among the Greeks is Aristotle, the most brilliant disciple of Plato. His gargantuan contributions to the history of thought span several areas: including logic, ethics, politics, literary criticism and various branches of natural science. In 400 BC, he wrote his chef d'oeuvre '*The Poetics*' which developed for the first time the concept of *mimesis* and *catharsis* which are still crucial in literary studies.<sup>7</sup> That Aristotle provided much of the terminologies used in literary theory and criticism<sup>8</sup> was yet another epochal contribution.

## (ii) Among the Romans

The critical discussion of literature was a popular social activity among the Roman elites and an obligation of the intelligentsia.<sup>9</sup> The most influential name in the history of Roman literary criticism is Quintus Horatius Flaccus – Horace in English – who is primarily known as a poet, a composer of odes, satires and epistles.<sup>9</sup> '*Epistle to the Pisos*' later christened '*Ars Poetica*' by Quintilian is the only one important critical document in verse written by Horace, and is regarded as one of the most influential texts of ancient criticism. The influence of Horace's *Ars Poetica* has been vast, exceeding the influence of Plato, and in many periods, that of Aristotle.<sup>10</sup> Another great critic in the history of Roman literary criticism is Longinus, a foremost romantic critic to whom the treatise '*perishpousos*' or '*On the Sublime*' was attributed. *On the Sublime* takes an approach to criticism which is completely different from that of Aristotle. If Aristotle is the model of all neo-classic and systematic approach to literature, Longinus may be looked upon as a forerunner of the intuitive and romantic views of the later neo-classical age; when several critics such as Boileau, Burlee and Kant wrote works on the subject of the Sublime. *On the Sublime* has continued to be relevant in contemporary criticism on account of its treatment of the sublime as a quality of the soul on spirit, rather than as a matter of mere technique.

## (iii) Among the Arabs

The question of Arabic literary criticism is non-negotiable, unassailable and incontrovertible as it is a *fait accompli*. However, what has generated acrid acrimony and ignited acerbic wrangling among the Arab cognoscenti is the point or timing of its emergence. It's a scientific fact that when angles, whether of elevation or depression, subtended by the eyes of different observers are divergent, the end results would be contradictory. Pronto, as the Arab literati were looking at the subject of quintessence and quiddity of criticism from different perspectives, they came out with four conflicting views, each of which may be rightly tagged a distinct school of thought. These are *Ibrahmī School*, *Abbasid School*, *Ghunaymid School* and *Manduric School* Explicated below are the exponents of various schools and their submittals on the subject.

### Ṭaha Aḥmad Ibrāhīm , the exponent of Ibrahmī School

Having graduated from Dār al-'Ulūm in 1920, Ṭaha Ibrāhīm got enrolled at Sorbonne University, Paris, where he obtained Diploma in Political Science in 1925. He returned to Egypt and worked as lecturer before he died in 1939.<sup>12</sup> His critical legacy themed '*Tārīkh al-naqd al-adabī 'ind al-'Arab*' is considered a stepping stone in studying the history of literary criticism among the Arabs. It gives detailed account of classical Arabic literary criticism, which is based on the notion that the principles of Arabic literary criticism should be constructed from the study of its literature and formed from its peculiarities and distinct nature. The first conspicuous topic in the book is the treatment of the issue of emergence of ancient Arabic criticism which is 'Arab' in birth and development based on the fact that it is inextricably interwoven with poetry which is 'Arab' in its elements,

approach, purpose and spirit; as it is free from any exotic influence. He says: 'We only knew the poetry as mature and complete with harmonious iambics, and harmonious rhythms as exemplified by *al-mu'allaqat* poets and other poets of *Jāhiliyyah*.<sup>13</sup> Though the exact and true early stage of Arabic criticism is not defined, but Taha is able to link it to the *Jāhiliyyah* period of '**pruning, refinement and rectification**' of poetry by the poets themselves. This is deducible from his book when he says:

'This correction of poem is literary criticism; and if the true early stage of Arabic poetry is not known to us; indeed, the true early stage of literary criticism has gone with it.'<sup>14</sup>

Having established this, he reeled incopious and ample samples to illustrate and corroborate the existence of literary criticism as far back as *Jāhiliyyah* period by saying: 'These references indicate the existence of forms of literary criticism in the *Jāhiliyyah* period.'<sup>15</sup>

Dr. Mustafā' Abd al-Raḥmān, an ardent stalwart and avowed disciple of this school in his book '*Fī al-naqd al-adabī al-qadīm 'ind al-'Arab*' bifurcates forms of literary criticism of the period into two namely:

- (i) ***al-naqd al-dhātī al-ta'athhurī***— emotional and spontaneous criticism.
- (ii) ***al-naqd al-ladhīmab'athuh al-rawiyyahwa-l-'anāh***: criticism based on reflection and longanimity.

The first type (emotional) takes different directions namely;

a. ***al-nadq al-lughawī***— Linguistic criticism. This type of criticism is rooted in the misapplication of a lexical item . One of the many examples he used in illustrating this form of criticism is a verse by al-Mutalammis.<sup>17</sup>

*waqad'atanāsā 'l-hammainda 'ddikarihi*

*bi-najin 'alayhi 'l-say'ariyyatumukdamin ;*

I try to forget sorrow whenever it comes ; through a speedy sturdy he-camel on which there is *al-say'ariyyah* (a sign on a she camel).

On hearing this, Ṭarafahibn al-'Abd said: "qadi '*stonwaq al-jamal*', meaning he has turned a he-camel into a she-camel, because, the word *al-say'ariyyah* he used while describing a he-camel is a sign found on the neck of a she-camel

(b) ***al-naqd al-ma'nawī***— semantic criticism which evaluates the meaning of word and the idea it portrays. He illustrates this type with many examples including the following verses of Hassan ibn Thabit.<sup>18</sup>

*Lanā 'l-jafanātu 'l-ghurruyalma'na bi-l-duhā;*

*wa'asyāfunāyaqturna min najdatindamā*

*WaladnāBanī 'l-'Anqā' wa 'bnayMuharrīqin ;*

*Faakrimbinākhālan; wa'akrim bi-nā 'bnamā*

We have big white bowls that glister in the fore noon ; and our swords are dripping blood from rescue operation.

We gave birth to the children of al-Anqā' and two sons of Muharrīq;

How noble we are maternal uncle! How noble we are as an offspring !

After hearing this, al-Nābigah al-Dhubyānī criticized Hassan saying: You are a poet, but for the belittlement of your bowls and swords; you also boasted with your progeny, instead of your patriarchal lineage.

Although Taha Ibrahim repudiates this judgment of al-Dhubyānī saying: “We have no doubt that this type of criticism – on the basis of plural of paucity and plentitude, was unknown in the Jāhiliyyah, but was found towards the end of the third century of Hijrah.<sup>19</sup> These verses polarized Arab literary entrepreneurs into two; a group approving the judgement and another supporting Hassān ibn Thābit

c. *al-naqd al-‘arūdī*– Prosodic criticism based on the evaluation of poetic meters and rhymes. One of the common prosodic faults during the Jāhiliyyah is rhyming fault of ‘*iqwā*’ that involves the interchange of vowels *kasrah* and *dammah* on the rhyme letter.<sup>20</sup> The perfect example of this is the following verses of al-Nābigah al-Dhubyānī.<sup>21</sup>

‘A min ‘ālī Mayyatarā’ ihun aw mughtadin?,

‘ajlānadhāzādīn waghayramuzawwadin

za‘ama ‘l-bawāriḥ annariḥlatanāghadan;

wa bi-dhākakhabbaranā ‘l-ghudāf al-‘aswadu

‘Are you departing early today or tomorrow from the Mayyah’s family? Hurriedly with provision or not

The ominous birds thought our journey would be tomorrow; that which the black raven has told us.

In the first verse, the rhyme letter (**d**) in ( *muzawwadin* ) bears **kasrah** while the same rhyme letter in the second verse (*al-‘aswadu*) bears **dammah**.

d. *al-mufaḍalah bayn al-shua‘ra*’ This connotes giving preference to a particular poet over others. This is a scenario where poets in a rendezvous strive to outshine one another by chanting one of their best literary renditions with the sole aim of clinching the honour of “*numeoruno*” among his colleagues. Mustafa exemplified this phenomenon with the opening verse of an ode of Hassān ibn Thābit. It may be germane here to give a concise exegetical note on the historical background for elucidation. Hassān went to Yemen to see king ‘Amr ibn al-Ḥārith al-‘A‘raj al-Ghassānī. He met the duo of al-Nābigah al-Dhubyānī and ‘Alqamah al-Faḥl with the king who advised him not to chant any poetry in the presence of the two poets; as he wouldn’t like to see him disgraced by them. But this admonition fell on deaf ears as Hassān insisted on engaging the duo in duel; he entreated his host to prevail on his rivals to allow him to be the first to recite his poetry. This behest enjoyed the approval of the poets and the acquiescence of the king. He then reeled in the *qasīdah* with this opening line.<sup>22</sup>

*Li-Llāhidarru ‘iṣabatinnādamtuhum*

*yawman bi – Jillaqafī ‘l-zamāni ‘l-‘awwal !*

How good was a group that I caroused with.

One day in Jillaq (Damascus) in the time past !

Evaluating this verse ‘Amr ibn al-Ḥārith al-Ghassānī said: ‘This, by your father is poetry par excellence ! This one overshadows and supersedes all I have heard (from the duo of al-Nābigah and ‘Alqamah) since morning. This is a sharp sword that cuts off all panegyric poems.<sup>23</sup> He then ordered for him a gift of one thousand dinars and an annual pension of the same amount. This ode is known as *al-battūr* (sharp sword) among scholars of Arabic literature

(b) **The criticism that is based on reflection and longanimity.** This takes the following dimensions.

i. **Correction and rectification:** which is pure artistic work performed by the poets themselves when they look critically into their literary production and give in the maturity it requires in order to delight the listeners or to be free from condemnation.<sup>24</sup> In relation to this ‘Adiyyibn al-Riqā’ says

*waqaṣīdatinbittuajma<sup>c</sup>ubaynahā*

*ḥattā‘uqawwimamaylahāwa sinādahā.*<sup>25</sup>

Many a poem I passed the night harmonizing their components till I perfected its flaws and rhyming faults.

It is deducible from the above that he, more often than not, exerted and exhausted himself, burning mid night oil in order to refine and prune his poems to attain an enviable and acceptable form of perfection that would become the talk of the town.

Prominent āhiliyyah poets with penchant for exerting themselves in the revision and correction of their works are ‘Awsb.Ḥajar, Zuhayrb.AbiSulmā, Ka’bb.Zubar and al-Ḥuṭay’ah among others. These poets are known as ‘*abīd al-shi‘r*’ meaning **slaves of poetry**; and their poems are nicknamed *al-ḥawliyyāt* and *al-muḥkamāt* meaning yearly poems and perfected poem.<sup>26</sup>

ii. **Rhapsodising and apprenticeship:** It was common during the *Jāhiliyyah* for anyone intending to become a poet to accompany an established poet always narrating his poetry. And this apprenticeship would last until he attained excellence and perfection in the art of poetisation.<sup>27</sup> A perfect example of this act is Zahayr who rhapsodized for ‘AwsibnḤajar al-Tamīmī, Ṭufayl al-Ghanawi and Bashāmah b. al-Ghadīr. Zuhayr did not only rhapsodise, but also trained others in this art. Prominent among his trainees are Ka<sup>c</sup>b his son and al-Ḥuṭay’ah.

iii **selection;** which is one of the critical activities that are full of literacy taste, and good mental perception together which is a culmination of long reflection and strain.<sup>28</sup> Selection of the seven odes, otherwise known as *al-Mu‘allaqāt* is a germane example here.

## II. Iḥsān Abbās – the exponent of Abbasid school

This school was founded by Professor ‘Iḥsān’Abbās (1920-2003) who was one of the most pre-eminent Arab scholars of the 20th century in the field of Arabic and Islamic studies. Born in Ghaza village in Palestine in 1920 and died in 2003, ‘Abbas received his BA, MA and PhD Degrees in Arabic literature from Fu’ādal-Awwal (now Cairo) University. In addition to his numerous scholarly articles and reviews, ‘Abbas authored seventy five books covering a wide range of modern and ancient Arabic discourses such as Literature, Geography, Law, Science and Political Thought. Professor ‘Iḥsan ‘Abbas was a Professor Emeritus at the American University in Beirut (AUB). He was also a member of the Royal Jordanian Academy, the Arabic Language Academies in Cairo, Damascus and the German Oriental Society....<sup>29</sup>

Professor ‘Iḥsan ‘Abbas traced the origin of literary criticism among the Arabs to the second century of Hijjah. He says: :

*“I have tried in this study to present a form of literary criticism among the Arabs during the end of the second century of Hijrah until the eighth century, or from the period which extended from al-‘Aṣma’ī to b. Khaldūn.”<sup>30</sup> This is based on five principles which are taste, explanation, justification, analysis and evaluation. These five principles are observed in his definition of criticism where he says: “Criticism in its reality is an expression about a complete look into the art in general and poetry in particular which begins with the literary taste, that is the ability to distinguish; and from there, it moves to explanation, justification, analysis and evaluation”.<sup>31</sup> These five principles work together in this order and for one another as ‘Iḥsan ‘Abbas says: “these are steps that cannot be free from one another and they are gradual in this order; so that the stand of the critic with regard to criticism will take a clear methodology which is based on principles”.<sup>32</sup>*

To this school the absence and bereavement of this methodology in the traditional Arabic literary criticism which is basically oral in form makes it a non-organised criticism. This is expressed by ‘Iḥsān ‘Abbās where he says:

*“The like of this methodology is not possible to exist, when most of the Arab nation literary heritage is oral, as oral perspective will not make possible to examine and look critically the literary work, even if it permitted a form of literary taste and perception for this the organized literary criticism came lately until the principles of writing/authorship of literary works were fully established”.*<sup>33</sup>

To this school, authorship of literary works creates a good ground for the organized criticism – which is its main thrust, – to thrive in which the perception of change and development plays a major role. To this ‘Iḥsān ‘Abbās says:

*“Authorship of literary work createss a good space for criticism, but it cannot create alone an organized criticism, rather there must be other factors, the most important of which is the perception for change and development.”*<sup>34</sup>

Thus, this school is of the opinion that Arabic literary criticism was not in existence before the second century of Hijra based on the following reasons:

- i. Absence of writing/authorship of literary works as most of Arabic literary heritage is taken orally.
- ii. Absence of perception for change and development.<sup>35</sup>

To this school al-‘Aṣma’ī is the father of organized literary criticism for his perception for change and development which is missing in pre-Asmai critics This is taken from the statement of ‘Ihsan ‘Abbas: “al’Asma’i – in my opinion – is the beginning of organized literary criticism because he perceived some differences that started to show in the poetic life...”<sup>36</sup> Thus to this school, with al’Aṣma’ī the criteria for criticism is complete (authorship of literary works and perception for change and development) without which there would be no organized literary criticism.

### III. Muhammad Ghunaymi Hilāl, the exponent of Ghunaymid School

This school was founded by Dr. Muhammad Ghunaymi Hilal (1916-1968) who linked the beginning of Arabic literary criticism with the emergence of philosophy among the Arabs. Muhammad Ghunaymi Hilal was a critic and a professor of Comparative Literature who is highly influenced by French civilization. In 1945, he traveled to France and stayed there for seven years during which he got his Bachelor and Doctoral degrees. In 1952, he returned to Egypt where he worked at al-Dār al-‘Ulūm, then, the American University before he moved to al-Azhar as professor and Head of Arabic studies department. In 1966, he moved to the University of Khartoum, where he died two years later in 1968. Above all Muhammad Ghunaymi is the pioneer of Comparative Literary studies.<sup>37</sup>

He emphasizes the close relationship between philosophy and criticism across all ages when he says: “Criticism is connected , - since its ancient period among the Greeks – with philosophy, until it became one of its branches; this connectivity has clearly increased in the modern literary periods ...”<sup>38</sup> He disregards the existence of traditional literary fairs of the *Jahiliyyah* period and that of the Islamic era. To this he says: “We pay no attention to the growth of ancient criticism with the general judgments issued by the classical poets for/against one another without analysis...”<sup>39</sup> He considered Quddāmāh Ja’far the real founder of Arabic literary criticism as he clearly applied the Greek principles of literary criticism.

### Origin of Arabic Literary Criticism according to Manduric School

This school was founded by Dr. Muhammad Mandur (1907-1965) who uses historical method to trace the origin of Arabic literary criticism. Muhammad Mandur, the great modern Egyptian literary critic was born in 1907 and



died in 1965. He had his Bachelor degree in 1925, a *Licentiate* in Arts 1929 and another in Law in 1930. He traveled to France in 1930 where he got a degree in French Literature, French Linguistics and another in Greek Language and Literature. He worked as a translator and a university lecturer in Egypt. In 1943 he got his Doctorate degree.<sup>40</sup>

The philosophy of this school is based on methodological criticism which Mandur defines as: “the criticism that is based on a methodology which is supported by fundamental theories or general practices ...”<sup>41</sup> It rejects the stands of ancient literary fairs and clubs of the *Jahiliyyah* period. To this Mandur says: “We did not focus particularly on the criticism of poets or arbitrators at the Arab literary fairs and the likes, among what we find in the books of literature and traditional narrations. Just for us to remain at the limits of the fundamental thoughts on which this book stands which is treating the Methodological criticism.”<sup>42</sup> It focuses on the critical method of *al-‘Āmidī* and *al-Jurjānī*: “We have made our focus, in this research, the two great literary critics *Abū ‘l-Qāsim al-‘Āmidī* and *al-Qāḍī al-Jurjānī*.”<sup>43</sup> This school is highly influenced by the great French critic Gustapha Lancon who happened to be one of Mandūr’s lecturers in France. Tracing the development of traditional Arabic literary criticism Muhammad Mandūr begins with the definition of literature and criticism, history of literature and the role of literary taste in literary works based on the perspective of G. Lancon.<sup>44</sup> At the end, Muhammad Mandur was able to arrive at the followings:

1. Literary criticism is purely Arabic by growth and development and it remains as such.<sup>45</sup>
2. Literary criticism among the Arab precedes the literary history.
3. Literary criticism among the Arabs is closely connected with poetry. Calling the traditional oral Arabic literary criticism – which is based on a mere literary taste, – criticism in a real sense is a way of distorting the historical facts or breaking the principles of research. On his rejection of traditional Arabic literary criticism which is based on a mere literary taste Muhammad Mandur gives two major reasons:
  1. Absence of methodology
  2. Absence of detailed analysis

According to this school the fourth century of Hijra is the true beginning of Arabic literary criticism. On that Muhammad Mandur has this to say: “Then we observed that the criticism of the fourth century of Hijra has foundations as it has branches...”<sup>47</sup>

#### IV. Conclusion

A juxtaposition and cursory glance at the trajectories of evolution and metamorphosis of literary criticism in the saracenic milieu and Hellenistic mise-en- scene would show a close nexus between the two. The trend of progressive development in both cases is a manifestation and reinforcement of natural mode of growth. One would need not need to be an ardent disciple of Sigmund Freud, Erik Eriksan or Vygotsky before discerning that development on any subject, physical or intellectual is a stepwise process; as all theories on development point in this direction. After all, Rome was not built in a day.. Literary criticism, like all fields of serious and complicated human endeavor can not take exception from this canonical rule. Adapting Freud’s theory on stages of development to Arabic literary criticism, the four schools discussed in this paper could conveniently key into the stages of infancy, childhood, adolescence and adulthood respectively.

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