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Lafz and Ma ‘Na in the Balance (1): Al-Jahiz’s (D.255/868) Inquiry into Verbal Art

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Abstract:

Al-Jāhiz is considered an outstanding literary critic by most of his biographers. He was the first to unambiguously judge the issue of lafz versus ma‘na in favor of the former. His predecessors consistently avoided preferring one over the other, al-Jāhiz has been regarded as the head or upholder of the ‘lafz school’ of Arabic literary criticism. His school came to be known as Ansar al-lafz (the upholders of verbal form). His views are usually regarded as being in favor of rhetorical style, figurative language and the tools that accompany this style, including eloquent phrases that rely on creative images, and figures of speech. According to al-Jahiz, all of these elements must be inspired by the masterpieces of ancient Arab diction.

This article is going to explain and elucidate more on the issue of lafz and ma‘na according to the view of al-Jahiz school of thought in literary theory.

Keywords: *Lafz, Ma‘na, Balance, al-Jahiz, Inquiry, Verbal Art*

1. Introduction

As mentioned, critics before al-Jāhiz never privileged form over content or vice-versa. This is perhaps because the issue itself was discussed in the light of the theological argument around the issue of the inimitability of the Qur’an. In other words, the critics avoided showing a preference for *lafz* over *ma‘nā* as they appear in the Qur’an. Such a judgment would mean that some aspects of the Qur’an were better than others. An examination of perspectives that had circulated before al-Jāhiz showed that such perspectives were mostly established within the framework of the issue of inimitability of the Qur’an, both in the circles of literary criticism and among theologians.

Al-Jahiz well-known statement *al-ma‘ani matruhatun fi al-tariq* (meanings can be picked up on the street corner) came in reaction to those who admired poetry for its contents or wisdom. The debate started when al-Jāhiz criticized those who admired the poetry of *mu‘allimun* (teachers) as being separate from real poetics and merely concerned with moralistic purposes. After noticing a *faqih* (a jurist) named Abu ‘Amr al-Shaybani in a circle at a mosque being so amazed by the following two lines of poetry

Do not think the real death is passing away, rather, the real death [i.e., most painful misfortune] is begging or petitioning others. Both of them are types of death [pains], but the second of them is harder than the first one.

Al-Jahiz out of disappointment stated that,

- “I stress that the poet who composed them was not a poet at all. I am not inclined to misjudge however, I would say that he had no relationship whatsoever with poetry. Abu ‘Amr al-Shaybani supported *ma‘ani* [i.e., themes] in poetry as the basis for eloquence. Meanings are to be found on the highways and byways and are easily realized by the foreigner as well as by the Arab, the town-dweller as well as the Bedouin. The excellence (of poetry) arises from *iqamat al-wazn* (writing rhythmically), *takhayyur al-lafz* (selecting the words), *suhulat al-makhrāj* (the easiness of articulation), *sihhat al-tab* ‘(correctness and strength of the natural poetic talent, *kathrat al-ma*’ (abundance of water or richness in moisture), and *jawdat al-sabk* (goodness of casting), for poetry is nothing but an art of formulation and casting, and a process of artistic presentation”¹

¹ Al-Jāhiz, *Kitab al-Hayawan*, vol.3 p.131.

Al-Jahiz was annoyed by those men of letters and critics of his time who thought that wise ideas and proverbs were the measuring of poetic merit. He also expressed disapproval that in these circles, *san'a* (mannerism or affectation)² and imitation were dominant, a phenomenon that according to him was dangerous for the flourishing of creativity and literary talent. In his work, *Risalat al-Mu'allimin* (The treatise about school-teachers), which dealt with the art of studying works by men known for their eloquence, al-Jahiz warned against the consequences of mere memorizing and imitating others' preferred themes and ideas. If this should happen, the student's work would then become no more than a compilation of inappropriate diction and affected meanings.³

1.1. The Role of Bayan (Eloquence)

The most substantial role of *bayan* is the communication of a meaning with clarity. He first stated that *bayan* is "a comprehensive name for anything that reveals the hidden meaning, because what matters is understanding, which is the ultimate goal sought by any [listener or speaker]. The minimal requirement of eloquence is that the audience not be confused by the speaker's bad explanation or presentation."⁴ Al-Jāhiz departed from the principle that ideas are hidden in the mind and that they come into existence only when they are uttered. He wrote: "*Ma'ani* are veiled and concealed i.e., in the minds]; they can only be revealed when they are exposed to an audience. This exposure of *ma'ani* depends on clarity, accuracy, the art of consistency, and precision in introductory parts. The concise indication as to the hidden meanings of *bayan* is that which God praised and to which God called. Indeed, *bayan* is [the style in which] the Qur'an speaks, and in which ancient Arabs competed with each other in eloquence."⁵

It is also his position that understanding the function of *bayan* is an essential beginning. Al-Jāhiz's idea may look like an oversimplification of the ultimate goal of eloquence, because according to his interpretation, every person can attain the goal of allowing others to understand his purpose, regardless of his level of education and eloquence. A simplistic understanding of al-Jāhiz's analysis would imply that any speech could be eloquent if the speaker makes us understand his meaning. He skillfully established a standard to measure whether a speech is eloquent or not.

He cited Abu 'Amr al-'Attabi's (d.220/835) definition of eloquence: "An eloquent person is anyone who makes you understand his meaning without repetition or hesitation, without [forcing you to] get help from somewhere else."⁶ Al-Jāhiz commented that,

- "'Attabi does not mean that the eloquent person is the one who would make us understand his intended meaning by *malhiin* (incorrect) language which is twisted from the right direction... what 'Attabi meant was that eloquence is the element (or part of speech) which makes you understand the meaning of the author or speaker according to *majari kalam al-'Arab al-fusaha* (the styles of eloquent Arabs)"⁷

1.2. The Aesthetical Merits in the Use of Lafz

Al-Jāhiz established the first solid school of verbal art. He presented a whole body of analysis of the verbal disciplines that detailed the elements and merits of wording and phraseology. Yaqut al-Hamawi referred to al-Jahiz in the following statement that summarized the general principles of the latter's theory:

"*al-kalam* (speech) penetrates into hearts and souls when it is spread out on a horizon in which its words are equivalent and compatible with its (meaning). (i.e. when [the words] explain [the meaning]. When *wafaqa al-hal* (fits the context) and is not forced to adopt attributes of *takalluf wa istikrah* (mannerism or affectation). When it is beautiful, selected and *saliman min al-fudul wa al-ta'qid* (free of unnecessary and complicated words)."⁸

In this passage, al-Jāhiz set up the dichotomy of form and content. To achieve excellence in discourse, he objected to *takalluf* and its common variants, *istikrah* (straining), and *san'a* (over-crafting). By perusing his main works, one discovers the main elements of the merits he set as conditions for an eloquent verbal art.

He emphasized the dichotomy of *lafz* and *ma'na* stating that "the impression of a discourse (would strike) the mind like an abundant rain strikes a fertile soil if the meaning is *sharif* (excellent) and the wording *baligh* (eloquent), '*sahih al-tab*' (truly natural), devoid of *istikrah* (straining), *ikhtilāl* (defectiveness), and *takalluf* (affectation)"⁹

1.3. Eloquent and Selected Words

Word selection is a basic principle in al-Jahiz literary theory. As a proponent of the artistic school of diction and *form*, he called upon poets and writers to be very careful in their choices of words and expressions. The first merit that al-Jahiz emphasized is what he called *al-lafz al-mukhtar* (chosen or selected words). For al-Jahiz words and expressions, must resonate with the listener's preference, be 'easy' on the tongue, that they should also be pleasant and sound eloquent to the ear. He pointed out that, "Speech can be divided

² Some modern critics used the term (labouriness) as van Gelder, or (mannerism) as Steven Sperl.

³ Al-Jāhiz, Abū 'Uthmān 'Amr b. Bahr. *Rasā'il al-Jāhiz*. vol.3 p.40.

⁴ Al-Jāhiz *al-Bayān wa al-Tabyīn*, vol.1 p.87.

⁵ Al-Jāhiz *al-Bayān wa al-Tabyīn*, vol.1 p.75.

⁶ Muḥammad 'Ammārī, *Qaḍiyyat al-Lafz wa al-Ma'nā wa Atharuhā fī Tadwīn al-Balāgha al-'Arabiyya*. p. 66.

⁷ Al-Jāhiz, *al-Bayān wa al-Tabyīn*, vol.1 p.166.

⁸ Al-Ḥamawī, Yāqūt. *Mu'jam al-Udabā' (Irshād al-Arīb ilā Ma'rifat al-Adīb)* ed. D.S. Margoliouth vol.2 p.8.

⁹ Al-Jāhiz, *al-Bayān wa al-Tabyīn*, vol.1 p.83.

into as many different levels or categories as people themselves: there are well-built, ugly, boring, light, and heavy types of speech. Arabs use all these categories to express their meanings.”¹⁰

He stressed that expression should be moderate and not exaggerated. He called upon writers to avoid the style of the ordinary folk which is used in daily life explaining that words and expressions must not be ‘*ammiyyan wa saqitan suqiyyan*’ (vernacular, or bazaar language); there is also, he explained, the high rhetorical style, which usually belongs to those who want to show and rhetorical skills and abilities by using the standard literary language. However, for al-Jāhiz, the recommended usage of words and expressions, should be at a moderate level between the above-mentioned two extremes.

Al-Jāhiz encouraged a medial diction, one divorced from affectation. Having emphasized clarity as the role of *bayan*, he proposed that a poet or a writer should avoid any stilted style or farfetchedness. As a proponent of traditional Arab eloquence, who believed it to be a natural talent of the Arabs, al-Jāhiz was opposed to mannerism and over-crafting in literary composition. Al-Jāhiz explained that the reader seeks a style that is moderate. For him, the reader reads a book in order to understand its meaning and prefers to find its language to be straightforward and common, devoid of what is *gharib al-a‘rab wa wahshiyy al-kalam* (strange and odd speech).

The point here is of a psychological concern. Al-Jāhiz was aware of the psychological state pertaining to the audience or readers, He emphasized that poets and speakers must take into account that the endurance and energy of readers and listeners are limited. He was afraid that boredom caused by uniformity would spoil the enjoyment of poems and prose. He was of the opinion that such a ‘spoiling’ of enjoyment may come from the use of *takalluf*. He [the writer or speaker] must not revise it in too serious a vein and he must paraphrase it up to the point where he *yantiqu bi lubbi al-lubb* (where he chooses only the core or the best of the best expressions).¹¹ Also, al-Jahiz put emphasis on the fact that both compilers of books and poets must not strain to create complicated meanings. This would result in stretching the limits of the patience of the readers.¹²

Al-Jāhiz believed that spontaneity and brevity were two features of the natural style. For example, He criticized al-Kumayt for stating that a poet who can compose good long poems should also be capable of composing good short ones. Elsewhere, al-Jāhiz expressed his admiration for the Umayyad poet al-Farazdaq and explained that one of the most important features of his poems was that they were short.¹³

Al-Jāhiz also suggested that an eloquent style is one which is well selected and carried out in such a way as to be consistent throughout. In other words, if a poem has the same high level of eloquence in every line, then the objective of an eloquent style has been achieved. He emphasized that speeches or poems should be short; however long speeches may also be appropriate on certain occasions. Al-Jāhiz criticized those poets who spent a long time ensuring that all the lines of a *qasida* were equally excellent. Yet, he excused those poets who composed formal odes in order to earn money. They found themselves in the capacity of the ‘*abid al-shi‘r*’ ‘slaves of poetry’, who followed the poetic school of Zuhayr and Hutay‘a.¹⁴ Al-Jāhiz agreed with al-Asma‘ī who was the first to criticize ‘the slaves of poetry’, and he commented that, “He [al-Asma‘ī] criticized Hutay‘a’s poetry; when he found it all over-crafted.”¹⁵ Al-Jāhiz argued that a thorough and time-consuming composition still might cause boredom in the readers or listeners even though it looks well-built. He has the following opinion regarding the style of two poets who were known to work hard on each line.

- “They [men of letters: if the poetry of Salih b. ‘Abd al-Quddus (d.160/777) and Sabiq al-Barbari (d. 100/718) were to be spread over many poems, these poems would be really excellent in quality; and their poetry would reach the horizon in the shape of current *nawadir sa‘ira* (epigrams). However, when a *qasida* consists wholly of *amthal* (aphorisms), it does not become as popular as do epigrams.”¹⁶

In my opinion, al-Jāhiz should have distinguished between two styles when speaking about *takalluf*. There are two activities that relate to speech and utterance. Firstly, with regard to speaking in daily life and daily activities. In this realm, al-Jāhiz was right to emphasize the Islamic values regarding the manner of speech and expressing oneself publicly. Such activities must be compatible Islamic precepts which discourage artifice. Secondly, in the area of composition and for purely literary purposes and activities, this type of writing needs more labor and talent. There is nothing wrong in working hard on rethinking and reworking the text and passages to produce an eloquent style (this issue will be discussed later).

1.4. *Gharīb* (Unfamiliar words)

Using strange and unfamiliar words according to al-Jāhiz standard is against the function of eloquence. Such a practice works against the principle of understanding and clarity, which he claimed to be the true merits of any eloquent speech. His way of thinking in his

¹⁰ Al-Jāhiz, *Al-Bayān wa al-Tabyīn*, vol.1 p.44.

¹¹ Al-Jāhiz, *Kitāb al-Ĥayawān*, vol.1 p.90.

¹² Al-Jāhiz, Abū Uthmān ‘Amr b. Bah̄r. *Rasā’il al-Jāhiz*. Ed Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Harūn p.155.

¹³ Al-Jāhiz, *al-Ĥayawān*, vol.3 p.98.

¹⁴ Al-Jāhiz, *Al-Bayān wa al-Tabyīn*, vol.2 p.13.

¹⁵ Al-Jāhiz, *Al-Bayān wa al-Tabyīn*, vol.1 p.206.

¹⁶ Al-Jāhiz, *Al-Bayān wa al-Tabyīn*, vol.1 p.206. I am using Geert van. Gelder translation. See *Beyond the Line*, 40.

book, *al-Bayān wa-al- Tabyīn*, seems to be a reaction to the tendency he observed among his contemporaries. He was reacting to the excessive usage of *gharīb* words or the view that eloquence involves use of unusual words.

Historically, the period prior to al-Jāhīz was known for the obsession with strange words, in particular in scholarly circles. Muḥammad ‘Ammārī mentioned some well-known scholars and critics who were known for their inclination to use *gharīb*: these included “‘Īsā. b. ‘Umar al-Thaqafī (d. 149/766) who was known by his adherence to the style of *taq’ir* (to speak gutturally) in his speech, even in his recitation of the Qur’ān; Naḍr b. Shumayl (d.203/819), Ibn Kinān al-Kāfī (d.207/822) who were also famous for their reliance on strange words; and Abū ‘Ubayda Ma’mar b. Muthannā who was also influenced by *gharīb*. In addition, Khalaf al-Aḥmar (d.180/796) was known to be a knowledgeable transmitter of *gharīb*.”¹⁷

1.5. Describing *Muqtaḍā al-Ĥāl* (What Circumstances Demand)

Al-Jāhīz placed special emphasis on *muwāfīqat al-ĥāl* (what circumstances demand.) He suggested that one must consider the status and nature of his audience or readers; each group of people, expected a special style of speech and words selection. He stated, “It is, essential that an eloquent speaker avoid using words that are not suitable for his audience. When a speaker is a theologian for example, he must avoid inserting the theological terms in his speech, [i.e., so as not to be influenced by his original discipline]”.¹⁸

Interestingly, eloquence to al-Jāhīz was not always a clearly defined process. He proposed that the standard of *muqtaḍā al-ĥāl* sometimes may demand breaking the rules of traditional eloquence. For example, he pointed out that the pleasure of humor demands a special use of words and expressions. The concept of pleasure here is meant to relate to an amusing speech and jokes that, according to him, require the use of special language. He stated that, “Some theological [or philosophical] use of words could be very funny, as in some of the poems of AbūNuwās or other poems that were composed for *tazarruf wa tamalluḥ* (humor or fun).”¹⁹ Al-Jāhīz claimed that *sakhīf* (silly) words would produce *ma’nā sakhīf* (silly meanings) and in our life, we need some witty and humorous conversation to relieve our seriousness and tension. He indicated that the *lahn* of women or *jawārī* (young non-Arab slave girls)²⁰ could be amusing or even cause a feeling of pleasure by their different ways of articulating, for example, by their playing the coquette. This is why he devoted parts of his work to the use of irony or humorous stories and the jokes of the wild Bedouin or *ḥamqā* (foolish people). Generally, al-Jāhīz looked at *bayān* not as always having a serious function.

2. Conclusion

Eloquence involves awareness of the verbal arts. Al-Jāhīz argued that Arabs excelled in this art. His main concern was eloquence of *lafz* and phraseology. In other words, *ma’nā* was important to al-Jāhīz’s perspective, but form and literary language were superior. His emphasis always remained on the secret of eloquence and on the mysterious ability to produce a beautiful literary text. A speaker or a writer who is capable of capturing meanings and conveying them in a charming and simple style, can be considered eloquent according to al-Jāhīz.

Literary theory was not an independent body or framework. Ironically, his elaborations regarding literary theory were mainly devoted to prose. Although al-Jāhīz occasionally discussed Arabic poetry, he did not directly deal with poetry as a literary discourse. Rather, he commented on poetry and the art of poetic composition. Despite his ingenuity in developing sophisticated analysis that could be both insightful and influential, his analyses remained atomistic.

¹⁷ ‘Ammārī, *Qaḍīyyat al-Lafz wa al-Ma’nā*, p.125.

¹⁸ Al-Jāhīz, *Al-Bayān wa al-Tabyīn*, vol.1 p.141.

¹⁹ Al-Jāhīz, *al-Bayān wa al-Tabīn*, vol.1 p.141.

²⁰ *Jāriya* also stands for a young girl in general.

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