

# The Arabic Alphabetical Letter A Psychological and Sociological Reading

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**Abstract**—Arabic letterforms of written texts, whether in poetry or prose, might uncover a unique means of expression that communicates with the eye and unlock a new channel towards human communication. This study, therefore, proposes a different and unusual perspective of analyzing written texts that allows for experiencing the aesthetic, psychological and sociological dimensions underlying the artistic value and representation of each Arabic alphabetical letter in its various forms and shapes. It also evokes the reader's perception and appreciation of the visual language of the written text represented in the alphabetical letters as an effective tool of expression where the letter in some literary texts, transcends its material entity to form a drawing or a shape that discloses to the eye the secrets of the heart. The reading suggested in this study exceeds the phonetic, lexicographic, morphological, syntactic and semantic meanings of words, enriching meaning with a different profound human consideration in which the Arabic letter reflects or echoes both psychological and sociological perspectives forming an aesthetic phenomenon that is able to convey the writer's inner self and emotions. This visual reading paves the way for new fields of research and text analysis with the aid of psychological and sociological sciences. In this reading, the visual compositions perceived by readers are to be inserted as one of the basic parameters of textuality and contemporary text analysis for both writers and readers.

**Index Terms**—Letter, sociological, forms, shapes, psychological.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Arabic letters in their various forms might stimulate in the minds of language users different rhythms, psychological triggers and perceptions of meanings that might not be found in the sounds or lexicographical equivalents of words.

This unusual perspective of reading the Arabic letters is the focus of this study which brings the following question into the front: Does the form of the alphabetical letter – not the sound nor the semantic reference of the word – echo meaning and add a new dimension to be taken into consideration during the process of text analysis?

This paper calls for having a new critical eye to read calligraphy and language letters, arguing that they are not mere symbols in the writing system, rather, they can be visual representation of a variety of meanings and dichotomies: unity vs. disunity, movement vs. stillness, roundness vs. straightness, openness vs. closure, and so forth. Letters might also stimulate the mental pictures of different objects:

scorpion or a crown, as examples. However, it should be clarified that alphabetical letters are not attributed or defined with any predetermined meanings.

Hence, my paper seeks to uncover new Sociological and psychological layers of meaning that the forms of the Arabic letters might render. It is based on Jacques Derrida's theory which calls for broadening the dimensions beyond the sound in criticism studies. Old Arabic Scholars' heritage either in prose or poetry will be the data set of this study. Interestingly, Old Scholars of Arabs – as the study will show – paid a considerable attention to the core issue of this paper, hundreds of years ago.

## II. THE ARABIC LETTER: A SOCIOLOGICAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL READING

Basically, letters are considered a language of sound communication. On the other hand, it is significant to point out that their forms and meanings today stand for their overtime minimized ancient origins of shapes and drawings. For instance, the letter **ا** which is the initial letter in the word bayt (house) originally was written in the drawing of a house to refer to the meaning of house or resting/sleeping. Overtime, the letter became a three – letter – version then minimized to one letter as it is known today.

In the heritage of the Arabic language scholars, it has been noticed that they were concerned with the forms and shapes of letters, realizing their connotative implications of meaning that transcend their physical form to an artistic tool of expression that unveil peoples' experiences, emotions and meanings intended. Hence, Euclid said, "Calligraphy is not a mere physical outcome; rather it is the geometry of the spirit".

Unfortunately, since the time of Old Scholars, this conception about the language letters has not received the required attention to be developed at the levels of theory and practice.

Hence, this study is an endeavor to build on what the Old Arabic pioneers started, highlighting the value of Arabic letterforms in adding to the meaning intended. The study, thus, seeks to shed light on the visual representations or the Arabic letterforms and the meanings they might convey in a specific experience or situation. Therefore, one of the major goals of this study is to invite contemporary Arabic language writers to take into their careful consideration the selection of letters whose forms might echo specific meanings.

Alkhafaji (466 hijri/1074 ad) wrote in his book "Sir Alfasha" (The Secret of Fluency) a statement that preceded its time that meaning has four dimensions: the first meaning is contained in its very nature, the second is a mental reflection of those who visualize them, the third is in the

words that represent them, and the fourth is in the forms of letters representing those words. [1]

Alqartajani (684 hijri/1285 ad) also said in his book Minhaj Albulagha' (The Approach of the Eloquent) that perception and the associations of meaning could be actualized through several sources: visualizing something in the mind as a result of thought, seeing something that reminds you of something else, seeing a sculpture or calligraphic structure or other similar entities. [2]

In other words, the physical or concrete manifestations and entities like sculptures or letters could communicate the inner picture of those producers. [3]

Alqurtajani's previous quotation shows that this orientation did exist despite none of it having reached us. Perhaps it lies buried in scrolls of transcripts that are yet to be discovered.

One of the studies that referred to the psychological dimension represented in the Arabic alphabetical letter, yet without considerable emphasis which might encourage further investigation, is the study of Alkala'y (6<sup>th</sup> century hijri) which can be found in his book "Ehkam San'at Alkalam" (The Guidelines of the Creators of Speech) to discuss the interpretation of the Old Arabic Scholars for the following old poetic verse:

بَعَثُوا إِلَيَّ صَحِيفَةً مَطْوِيَةً      بِخِتَامِهَا غُوثَانَهَا، كَالْعَقْرَبِ  
فَعَرَفْتُ فِيهَا الشَّرَّ حِينَ رَأَيْتُهَا      فَفَضَّضْتُهَا عَنْ مِثْلِ رِيحِ الْجُورَبِ

Translation: I was sent a sealed letter, The title of it was a word that looked like a scorpion (كُهْمَس).

So I knew that its content was harmful. As I opened it, the smell of its words were like smelly socks.

العنوان (which means title) is what was used to be written on the back of a letter after it was sealed. Some claimed that the poet compared the title to a scorpion because it yields to him in two ways: either that the letters of the title are like a scorpion, or that the content of the letter was harmful as the venom of a scorpion. Alasma'y (216 hijri/831 ad) said, "The poet intended for the meaning of title (كُهْمَس) which is a word that has the drawing of a scorpion." [4] So essentially, Alasma'y is saying that the poet thought of a scorpion when he saw the word (كُهْمَس) because the word itself resembles a scorpion.

Another poetic verse that transcended the dictionary definition of a word and looked to the form if its letters was:

كَتَبْتُ إِلَيْهِ هَلْ تُحِبُّ زِيَارَتِي  
فَوَقَعَ لَا، خَوْفَ الرَّقِيبِ الْمُصَدَّقِ  
فَأَيَّقَنْتُ مِنْ لَا بِالْعِنَاقِ عِيَافَةً [5]

كَمَا اجْتَمَعَتْ لَا، ثُمَّ لَمْ تَنْفَرِقِ [6]

Which means in English: the poet is asking his beloved to come visit him and she responds with no out of fear. However, her written response (لا) makes him realize that she is eager to meet hem and they will never part. Such interpretation the poet made was based on the form and visual indication of the word (لا) (which means the negative particle (No) and not the denotative or lexicographical meaning. To clarify, The form of the word (لا) where the letter (ل) embraces the letter (ا) evokes the perception of two people

who closely relate to each other and will never be apart.

Another example that reflects on the use of the shape (لا) is in the verse:

إِنِّي رَأَيْتُكَ فِي نَوْمِي تُعَانِقُنِي  
كَمَا يُعَانِقُ لَامَ الْكَاتِبِ الْأَلْفَا [7]

Which means in English: I saw you holding me in my sleep the same way the writer of two letters (لا) makes them hold one another.

Other scholars looked also into other letters and meanings they might represent. For example, some saw in the knotted form of the letter "م" a representation of tightness of the chest out of suffering, and saw the sense of abandonment and grief in the curved shape of the letter "ن". One verse says:

قَدْ صِرْتُ كَالنَّوْنِ فِي الْهَجْرَانِ مُنْحَنِيًا  
وَكُنْتُ فِي الْوَصْلِ عِنْدَ الْإِلْفِ كَالْأَلْفِ  
وَضَاقَ صَدْرِي مِثْلَ الْمِيمِ مِنْ حَزْنِي  
فَهَلْ أَرَانِي وَجِبِّي مِثْلَ لَامِ الْأَلْفِ [8]

Which means in English: the poet feels as abandoned as the shape of noon "ن" might show (the shape resembles a dot drifting away from company) when he was once as connected as the letter aleph "ا" (the shape is gracefully perpendicular as someone who is constantly accompanied by others). He also feels tightness in his chest like that of the letter meem "م" (the shape resembles being hunched over), and longs for connection like that of the letters lam "ل" and aleph "ا".

Moreover, Ahmad Bin Yahya Bin Aby Hajala Almaghreby (776 hijri/1155 ad) saw that in the shape of the letter aleph "ا", fitness of the body and in the letter sheen "ش" the fringe. As the following verse says:

فَكَمْ أَلْفٍ بِهَا أُمْسِي رَشِيقَ الْقَامَةِ النَّصْرَةَ  
وَكَمْ سِينٍ بِحَاشِيَةِ الْكِتَابِ تَخَالُهَا  
طَرَفُهُ [9]

Which means in English: the poet is comparing the form of aleph "ا" with a high up fit straight body and the shape of sheen "ش" with the fringe.

Furthermore, Abu Taleb Yahya Bin Aby Alfaraj (594 hijri/1155 ad) said the straightness of the letter aleph "ا" is an encouragement to be straight happy, and poise in life as he mentioned in his verse:

إِنْ كُنْتُ تَسْعَى لِلسَّعَادَةِ فَاسْتَقِمِ  
تَلِّ الْمُرَادَ وَلَوْ سَمَوْتَ إِلَى السَّمَاءِ  
أَلْفَ الْكِتَابَةِ وَهُوَ بَعْضُ حُرُوفِهِ  
لَمَا اسْتَقَامَ عَلَى الْجَمِيعِ تَقَدُّمًا [10]

Which means in English: if you are seeking happiness, be poised and straight, and you shall get what you seek no matter high was the goal as the aleph "ا" did the same and advanced on all the other letters of the Arabic alphabets by becoming the first.

On the contrary, another poet saw in the form of the straight letter aleph "ا" a misfortune, being deprived of the dot which has been won by the crooked/curved letter noon "ن" as triumph that reflected the twist of ethics of his time:

مَنْ يَسْتَقِيمُ يُحْرَمُ مَنَاهُ وَمَنْ يَزْغُ  
يُخْصَنُ بِالْإِسْعَافِ وَالتَّمْكِينِ  
أَنْظُرْ إِلَى الْأَلْفِ اسْتَقَامَ فَفَاتَهُ



وَقَدْ غَدَوْتُ إِلَى الْأَحَانُوتِ يَبْبِغِي

شَاوٍ مِثْلُ شَوْلٍ شُلُّشْلٌ شَوْلٌ [22]

Which means in English: I left for the liquor store with a young lad quietly following behind: can put up the image of the boy and his walk in the mind of the reader. The boy was following Ala'sha so lightly and quietly that he didn't notice him as he was walking towards the store. Shalool "شَوْل", Sholshol "شُلُّشْل" and Shawel "شَوْل" are words that are said to a young boy who is light and energetic in his movement. The form of the letter sheen "ش" represents the balance of the boy's movement on the ground.

Whereas the three dots that are placed at the top of the letter in a way that they don't become closer or further from each other and never fall off represent the graceful hops he makes so lightly without being noticed, as the drawing below might show:

ششششششششششششش

If we look over to this verse written by Almotanaby (354 H/965 ad):

لَوْ كُنْتُ كُنْتُ كُنْتُ الْحَبِّ كُنْتُ كَمَا

كُنَّا نَكُونُ وَلَكِنْ ذَلِكَ لَمْ يَكُنْ [23]

Which means in English: if you silenced your love, you would have been as we always used to be but unfortunately you did not.

If we pay a close attention to the form of the letter kaf/k "ك" which the poet chooses and repeats to express his inner self, we might disclose his secret. I think that the open angle of the letter gives off the impression of freedom in an infinite space as well as clarity and unambiguity, just like his love which longs for this same freedom.

### III. CONCLUSION

This study has made an authentic attempt to shed light on new layers of meaning the form of the Arabic alphabetical letter can render. The study adopts the psychological and sociological perspectives to revisit the great verses of old Arabic poets along with the interpretations by Old Arabic critics. It has been concluded that choosing a specific letter, or repeating another might convey the psychological, mental and emotional states of the writer.

Moreover, this study concludes that our lack of investing in the visual representations of Arabic alphabetical letters has rendered our understanding of certain texts incompetent. Therefore, utilizing this new perspective of visual representations of letterforms could give texts their individuality and distinction.

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