The Arabic Alphabetic 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 ب 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 Alfasaha” (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]

Alqartajani’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 (6th 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:

بيحتوا إلى صحبة مطوية
فَحَرَّفَتْ فيها المَثْرُ حين رَأِيتِها
فَفَضَضْرُا عَْٓ ِِثًِْ س٠حِ اٌجَْٛسَبِ 
Translation: I was sent a sealed letter, The title of it was a word that looked like a scorpion (كلمة). So I knew that its content was harmful. As I opened it, the smell of its words were like smelly socks.

Almasa’y (216 hijri/831 ad) said, “The poet intended for the meaning of title (الاسم) is what was used to be written on the shape of a scorpion.” [4] So essentially, Almasa’y is saying that the poet thought of a scorpion when he saw the word (كلمة) 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:

كلثُث إليه هل يُجبِ زِيارتي
فَوْقُ لا، حُرَّفَ الرَّأِبِ السَّمَكَدُ
فَأَقْبَلَتْ من لا بالعذاب عَيَابَة [5]
كمما اعْتَجِعْت، لا، لم تَتَفْقَرَ[6]
Which means in English: the poet feels as abandoned 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) (the shape is gracefully perpendicular as someone who is constantly accompanied by others).

Moreover, Ahmad Bin Yahya Bin Aby Hajala Almaghreby (776 hijri/1155 ad) saw that in the shape of the letter aleph (ا) “I” is straight, happiness, and poise in life as he mentioned in his verse:

إن كنت تسعى للسعادة فاستمتلك
فَأَقْبَلَتْ من لا بالعذاب عَيَابَة
لَمْ تَتَفْقَرَ[6]
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:

من يَسْتَمِّع لِمَنْ أَحْزَىٛ وَذَّرِّعْ
فَأَقْبَلَتْ من لا بالعذاب عَيَابَة
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 him 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 (ن) is in the verse:

إن يَائِلُك في نَوْمٍ مَّثْمَثْي
كلثُث من لا بالعذاب عَيَابَة [7]
Which means in English: I saw you holding me in my sleep the same way the writer of two letters (ن) 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 “ى” 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:

قد صَرَّتُ كَالْجَزَّامِ في الهِجْرَانِ مُلْخِنَا
وَلَكَ فِي الْوَقُولِ عَلَدَ الإِفْ آللَّفِ
فَفُضَضْرُا عَْٓ ِِثًِْ س٠حِ اٌجَْٛسَبِ
Translation: 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:
Which means in English: being righteous doesn’t always help a person reach his goal; as an example, look at what it is done to the straight aleph “א” and how the curved noon “נ” won the dot on top of it by being crooked.

Furthermore, many poets utilized the alphabets to compare and describe the beauties of a lover. They compared the eyebrows to the letter noon “ن”; the eyes to ein “י”; the cheek to wow “ו”; the mouth to meem “מ” and to sad “ס”; the curves of the body to the letter seen “ס” and the fringe to the letter sheen “ש”. [12]

As clarified earlier, this is how the ancient Arabs connected and compared the forms of Arab alphabetical letters to express meanings and emotions, in addition to comparing the letter a certain body organ.

We can also elicit that the meaning a poet gives to the form of a letter reflects his personal and emotional feelings and mood when he sees the letter. At the same time, the meaning does not go beyond what the form of the letter might indicate. Also it is significant to stress here that the forms of Arabic alphabetical letters are not previously defined or connected to meanings.

Despite this, Alkhaleel Bin Ahmad Alfarahidi (170 hijri/786 ad) tied the Arabic alphabetical letter to an outside concrete reference, and he saw that each letter had an individual meaning. Perhaps he was inspired by the form of the letter to give each one its meaning. [13] For example, he claimed:

Ta/t “ת”: a cow that is rich with milk.
Jeem/j “ג”: a strong camel
Ha/h “ח”: a very rude and insolent woman
Dal/d “ד”: an obese woman
Dad (no equivalent in English/exclusive to Arabic) “ḍ”: a hoopoe as it lifts its head and shrieks.
Ein (no equivalent in English) “ע”: the hump of a camel
Fa/f “ף”: foam of the sea
Kaf/k “ך”: a wise pure man
 Ibn Sina (428 hijri/1036 ad) went as far as to claim that Arabic alphabetical letters could be equated with non-verbal and natural phenomena stimulation. He said we can hear:

Ta/t “ת”: when tapping a finger to the palm in a hard way.
Jeem/j “ג”: when dropping a drop of liquid in another liquid, such as a drop of water being submerged into still water and drawn in it.
Ha/h “ח”: when sighing in a glottal way or when flatly running a hand over soft and rough surfaces.
Dal/d “ד”: same as Ta/t “ת” but gentler.
Dad (no equivalent in English/exclusive to Arabic) “ḍ”: when popping big liquid bubbles.
Ein (no equivalent in English) “ע”: when harshly exhaling air from a liquid passageway.
Fa/f “ף”: when trees rustle.
Kaf/k “ך”: when a big solid item falls on another more solid. [14]

This is how sounds of letters echo sounds in nature, as well as their forms could stimulate shapes and forms from nature.

Albaqalani (402 hijri/1013 ad) stated that “calligraphy is compared with sounds in the sense that both require careful clarity, accuracy and gracefulness as both are effective means to express differences of meaning. As well, both calligraphy and sound system are compared with photography as demanding a skillful hand and mind to capture the emotional status of happiness, sadness, optimism and so forth.” [15]

Another linguistic phenomenon that is in relation to this study is alliteration or the repetition of the same or similar specific letters in verse. Since some Arabic scholars considered this phenomenon as odd and unacceptable, this study seeks to propose a different interpretation based on sociological and psychological dimensions and effect that might be sought to be conveyed via such alliteration or repetition of certain forms of letters.

An example of this is the repetition of the letter qaf/q “ق” in the poetic verse of Almotanaby (354 hijri/965 ad):

Which means in English: the poet says that he bothered the camel he was riding with his inner concerns so much that their movement became turbulent on the terrain they were crossing.

In this respect, ancient critics stated that all the words used in this verse resemble movement. [17] I think that such repetition of the letter qaf “ق” dramatically intensifies the meaning of movement and turbulence. Particularly when combined with the ascending and descending movement of the letter lam “ل”.

In his book Alteraz “The Model”, AlAlawi (705 hijri/1305 ad) saw that the repetition of qaf “ق” was equal to the trot of a camel as it advances then takes a step back. [18] I think he noticed this as he started writing the letter qaf “ق” as it is a line going forward “ـ” and then going back again “ ـ”.

Another poet recites:

Which means in English: this verse depicts a man named Harb who was buried in an area so drought and remote with nothing around.

In interpretation of this verse, Ibn Atheer (637 hijri/1239 ad) said that the repetition of these qaf’s “ق” and ra’s “ر” is similar to a chain. [20] I think that what Ibn Atheer might have visualized from such repetition is the shape of a grave placed in a barren and empty place as illustrated below:

In other verses, such as:

The poet addresses his beloved blaming her of her bitter abandonment and stalling. Ibn Al atheer interpreted this verse line as full of complexes. I think that this interesting interpretation was inspired by the shape of the connected knots manifested in the letter meem “م” as in the illustration below to give the meaning of closure, torture and tension.

Moreover, perhaps the shape of the letter sheen “ش” in the following verse by Ala’sha (7 H):
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 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 the same freedom.

### III. CONCLUSION

This study has made an authentic attempt to shed light on new layers of meaning of 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.

### REFERENCES


