

# Analysing The Genre And Language Used In Modern Arabic Literature

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## Abstract

This paper is designed to analyse the genre of literature that is mostly expressed in the Arabic language. Literature have been efficient in serving multiple functions in the interpretation of life and culture. The Arabic language has been prominent for ages due to the military, religious and economic importance of speakers of the language. This paper then examines the basic elements of literature as it relates to the genre and compares it with the Arabic language. References are made to the past and used to explain the present condition of modern Arabic literature. The conclusion recommends that translating Arabic literature to other popular languages will to a greater extent expand the bounds of Arabic literature.

## Introduction

Literature is a prominent field of study that have over the years been efficient in managing every aspect of human life as it relates to history, economics, entertainment, religion and politics. It is obvious that humans are stratified based on race, geographical location, religion and language. Every human society is unique in its traditional system. Most modern traditions thrive on the backdrop of ancient values and arts. Literature has been extraordinary in relating traditional values in a creative mode while it still taxis such values to the future.

Arabic Language is an ancient language that has a unique status in the languages of the world. Archaeologist have unearthed written materials that posits the Arabic Language to date 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. Justifiably then, the Arabic Language is invaluable in historical matters because of its age and continuity to the modern world. (Encarta 2009)

Literature as a viable activity of man that has been viewed as artistic due to its use of language and intrinsic values. The English language and French Language have been popularised through literary works which encompasses artistic writings and other forms of writing. This paper then is designed to analyse the genre and language used in Arabic literature. Literary works expressed through the

Arabic languages will be analysed in course of this study.

It is noteworthy to know that literature has been efficient in providing information concerning history of man. Arabic is an ancient historical language, it is then true to mention that Arabic language must (not may) have literary materials that dates back to ancient times.

## Literature Review

Literature has been defined in different ways by different literary and non-literary scholars over the years. There are definitions that date as far back as the 18<sup>th</sup> century while most definitions are modern.

Matthew (1914) defined literature as a text that gives knowledge to the reader by means of writings or books. Winchester (2005) in agreement with DeQuincy who defines literature as a writing that gives power, defines literature a writing that appeals to the emotion of an individual by affecting it to act. To him any text that sparks interest in a reader and sustains such interest is considered as literature. C.T Winchester points out that criticises human life and interprets the actions of man. So any written text that can incite, excite or activate a person to take action because of the information gotten from a text is considered literature.

These definitions are considered old due to the time of publications but have they been hackneyed or obsoleted? The answer is no!

Cambridge Advanced Learners 'Dictionary defines literature as a text that is artistic and have a lasting value. This definition indicates that literary works that are artistic do not expire due to dates like other materials in other spheres of human endeavour. For example, many books on computer, building, medicine, agriculture that are more than 50 or less years old may not be considered appropriate for research in the modern world. But such literary works like Beowulf, Shakespearean text and others that are more than 100 years old are still being considered germane in the modern world. This is because these text have been able to sustain the interest of readers since their origin to this day.

Encarta (2009) describes literature as any text that has permanent value. This is in accordance with Wellek (2006) who opines that all written materials that expresses permanent information should be considered as literature.

What gives a book permanence? The simple answer is the message it expresses. Text about human issues of life, culture and most times religion can indeed have a lasting value.

More recently, Wikipedia (2008) considers as any writing that examines human culture using artistic or creative skills. Hancock (2006) defines literature as a body of artistic writings that examines the culture, language and existence of a people in a particular time. Hancock argues that any written work whether from imagination or factual that is artistically written to appeal to the emotion of the reader is considered as literature.

Davids (2004) agrees that literature is a writing that is artistically and creatively written to evoke the emotion of a reader.

Most scholars who defined literature as an artistic writing that can evoke the emotion of a reader and have a long lasting effect in the mind of a reader do not considers non artistic written works as literature. To effectively bound literature from other written materials, some have defines it a works of art such as poetry, prose and drama that reflects the human experience.

Well, for me personally, I consider literature as the study of written works of art that are written to examine human experiences with a view to entertain, educate and instruct. My knowledge of literature has made me to be able to outline some human experiences that authors have creatively written and whose message should be considered as permanent.

Examples are:

**The Colonial Experience:** Things Fall apart by Chinua Achebe and Heart of darkness by Joseph Conrad are among countless examples.

**Love and Betrayal:** William Shakepeare Julius Caesar and Othello are examples

**Imagination and Tales:** The Arabian Night

**Racism and Slavery:** Richard's Wright Native Son

**Female Slavery and oppression:** Nawal El Saadawi's Woman at Point Zero

These shows that literature should be able to examine issues that touch on the lives of humans not merely on systems, institutions and concepts. This is what gives literature the permanence as mentioned by authors. The issues it examines and the way it addresses the issue in dramatic, prosaic or poetic forms evokes the emotion of the reader and sustains it over the years. Conclusively, literature then cannot be limited to a single form of definition because it is a structure that is principled on many concepts concerning man's existence and his environment.

In the light of this, any work of art that is creatively written to examine the experiences of man as a living being should be considered as literature.

In summary then, any spoken or written material that reflects any or all of the following should be considered as literature:

Artistically written

Spurs the interest of the reader

Reflects human imagination and experience

Examines culture and societal relationship

Is entertaining

Can be expressed orally like tales and music

Literature then is considered as an efficient teaching tool that enables one to be able to understand human existence and interpret issues of life. According to Literature in English curriculum (2014) literature studies in schools enable learners to be able to:

Get entertained

Be self-expressive

Be creative

Be competent in their language use

Be creative and skilful In writing skills

Learn societal values

Learn about local, national and international cultures

So any book considered as literature should be able to achieve some or all of these.

## GENRES OF LITERATURE

Literature is classed into 3 main forms:

Poetry

Prose

Drama (plays)

## POETRY

Poetry is a genre of literature that have been defined in various ways due to its form and elements. The Cambridge Advanced Learners' dictionary defines a poem as a writing in where words of deep emotional thoughts are organised into lines, stanzas and verses. The dictionary mentions that a poem is unique due to its form, use of sound elements such as rhymes and figurative expressions which contributes to the extensive use of imagery (words which appeal to the senses of the reader as it relates to smell, touch, hear, sight and even taste.

Encarta (2009) describes poetry rhythmic expressions that is spoken or written. Poetry according to the source is different from prose due to its mode of arranging thoughts in units of lines, stanzas and verses.

It is obvious then that most languages such as Arabic can easily formulate poems because of its relationship with songs due to rhymes and verses.

## PROSE

Prose is a genre of literature that has been best described as a story. Cambridge Advanced Learners' dictionary defines prose as being opposite to poetry. Prose makes use of ordinary language that can be described as narrative and descriptive. It is written in sentences, paragraphs and chapters.

Prose then is a genre of literature that narrates human experiences or imagination using a story telling mode.

According to the Curriculum and Assessment Guide (2014), prose have features which distinguishes from the other two genres.

**Author** : Prose works most times can be traced to an author whose information can be used as a guide to understand the story. However, due to lack of orthography and records, some stories of ancient time can hardly be traced with authorship and this affects some traditional tales from the Arabic language.

**Character**: Stories most times have people who perform actions just like the story about Sinbad the voyager and the Caliph of Baghdad.

**Closing**: A prose story should have an ending

**Conflict and Resolution**: To sustain the interest of a reader, disagreements between characters and its resolution is a common feature in prosaic text.

**Cultural Background**: A story may not have an author but it will spring from a culture. The tales in the book Arabian Nights sprang from Arabic speaking communities.

**Dialogue**.: Characters in a story are meant to converse. Dialogue then is used to indicate what characters say to one another.

**Message and Theme**: A story should have a message that it seeks to express. It can be moral value or something different.

**Plot**: Events form a story, plot then refers to the sequence or arrangements of such events.

**Setting**: A setting refers to the location of events or series of action in a story.

**Style**: The style an author uses to tell his story can be identified from the narration pattern or technique.

## Drama

Drama is a genre of literature that is written for the main purpose of being performed. Another word for drama is play. Drama is a fictional genre of literature because it imitates experiences in life and performs it to entertain, educate and instruct the audience.

Drama makes use of costumes to depict the role of a character and it relies on dialogue that is structured in a speech turn taking mode. Unlike records of Greek plays and English plays, Arabic speaking people do not have a concrete proof of hosting shows in theatres but there must have been demonstrated actions organised to amuse or instruct audience in both royal and common settings.

## Arabic Language and Literature

Language has been defined as a system of human communication that is made up of sounds, words and rules that govern its meaning. (Cambridge Dictionary 4<sup>th</sup> edition)

Arabic language is an age long language that dates back 7 C.E according to Veestegh (1997) This shows that the language is not unpopular in terms of age and uniqueness.

Ibrahim Al Huri (2015) observes that the Arabic language is considered the 6<sup>th</sup> United Nation's Official language. The number of speakers around the world also contributed to this status because over 300million people speak the language in 2 continents (more than 20 countries).

Moreover, the language is considered holy because it is the language of Islam religion. There are ancient countries of the World such as Egypt, Jordan and Syria that makes use of the Arabic language. These nations have their culture, tales and other experiences that have been verbally transmitted from one generation to another. This then justifies the stance that literature cannot be absented in the language of Arabic. Language is the main vehicle that literature is transmitted in, the Arabic language then cannot be relegated from other languages like English, French and Spanish.

McFadden (1978) in his definition of literature observes that a literature is a canon that contains world in a language by which a group, sect or community defines its historical and ancient existence.

It is right to say that the more than 22 countries that speak Arabic are one family on the basis of religion and language. Their cultures are closely related and they share similar beliefs. Note also that not all Arabic speakers are Muslims some are Christians while others belong to other forms of religion such as Judaism. (Farghaly, 2010)

Kaplan (2005) states clearly that language and literature are two structures that are bolted to each other. He mentions that for culture of a community to gain continuity, then such as culture should be saved in the language. As language is transmitted from generation to generation, culture which is embedded in such language will sail alongside the language.

Kantacioglu (2005) describes literature as a linguistic transmitter that ensures the cultural features of a language that are embedded in the language is transmitted alongside the language.

Human experiences over the years may seem to have changed but the fact remains the same as it concerns culture. Every society of man in ancient times and modern times are cultured based on communal tradition or personal culture. Kantarcioglu (1997) describes literature as work of human experiences. This then goes to show the importance of literature in language structure and continuity. Existence as a community, group, family or individual is enough to provide basis for one to be able to formulate literary works.

Arabic language users are not supernatural or inferior. Just as English literature and French literature examine the culture and experiences of their people using literature, the Arabic user in a similar way does the same.

Egypt as an Arabic nation is known to have means of inscribing concepts and ideas in written form before modern form of writing, it is apt then to agree that Arabic is a language must have a status where it can be described as orthographic. There have been findings that shows that an Arabic nation like Jordan have archetypes such as sculptors which are created to save cultural tenets. Then it is agreeable to note that there are records of creative writings such as tales, songs and quotes which are aspects of literature.

The writing system of Arabic is quite different from languages such as English and French,

however, the thoughts are well expressed and when translated can be delighting to any reader.

### **Sources of Arabic Literature**

It has been clearly justified that literature, language and culture are bonded because they are all means of interpreting the life of man. The sources of literature are not difficult to find. Most literary materials are sourced from human experiences and creatively woven into an artistic writing.

The history of the native Arabians shows that they have experienced every aspect of human family on earth. Issues about politics, colonialism, religious indifferences, bountiful and scanty economy, education, religion, feminist issues and others are core issues that most Arabic nations have experienced.

It is justifiable then to say that it would not be a herculean task for one to be able to generate a literary work that skilfully expresses condition of life for an Arabic speaking person of community.

For example, as it concerns world ruler ship, Egypt and Iran are contenders in the past and present who seeks to carve a niche in global politics.

Jordan was colonised by a super power both in ancient time and in the modern world, so literary works about being colonised is not scanty in Jordan.

Saudi Arabia's Mecca is a venerated site for over a billion Muslims worldwide. So issues about modern religion and ancient religions cannot be vacated from the experiences of Saudi Arabia.

Harsh economic policies due to internal and external crisis affects Arab countries too. So a literary critic can easily source for conceptual experiences to build on.

Most Arabic speaking communities are renowned for their life as nomads and this in a great way also facilitated the spread of Islam and the Arabic language.

According to NOUN (2010) on the issues of occupations for most Arabic speaking people, nomadic lifestyle seats well with most of them. NOUN categorises the social structure of Arabians into two.

Based on geographical location, Arab speaking natives who lived around the desert area where mainly nomads. The life of a nomad is one can be best described as simple and rustic. The famous Psalm 23 was composed by shepherd and King, David (Dauda in Islam). It is obvious then that songs about the life of a shepherd will emanate from the coffers of this nomads to keep them company and to teach a lesson or narrate an experience.

NOUN (2010) also mentions that the city dwellers who were more settled than the nomads built great cities such as such as Yemen, Hirah, Ghassan and Taif. Being more permanent than the tribe of the nomads, these city dwellers will have reason to get entertain from actions such as dancing and even acting. The truism of this statement lies in the history of Yemen and Jordan where royal families were mostly entertained and educated. Tales about heroes, conquerors, family and communal values were part of family discussions. These would have formed better part of prosaic literature as later discovered by some researchers.

Thomas Herzog in Walter De Gruyter (2012) describes the Arab culture as more oral than orthographic. He observes that Arabian culture are mainly performed and transmitted verbally. He mentions that oral epic narration can be traced from jāhiliya, to other narratives that have been transmitted to the present day. The fact that Arabic language did not get more of orthographical records until the modern period does not mean that it never had literature because literature can be spoken or written. It is obvious then that Arabic speaking natives have many sources from which all forms of literature can be extracted including fiction and non-fiction concepts.

### **Examples of Literature from Arabic Origin**

#### **Poets of Arabic Origin and Themes for Poems Before Islam:**

Noun (2010) observes that Arabs are advantageous in having basis to create poems. This is attributed to the fact that Arabians have physical and historical factors that can be used to create poems. The complex environment, natural endowments in the desert and savannah

regions are inspiring to create literary works such as poems.

### **Poets of Ancient Arabic Origin**

#### **Imru`u`l-Qays**

He was the son of Handaj ibn Juhri al-Kindi. He is a renowned poet born into a royal family. His father was murdered as a king and this made his life hard. He composed poems about betrayal and dark part of human mind.

#### **Poem About Night By Imru**

And the night like the oceans surge extend its covers above me with different types of travails to try me,

And I said unto it as it staggers along (like a carnel) pushing its back dragging its base with its chest protruded.

O protracted night will you not pave way for the morn? Alas! the morning itself is not better than you.

How amazing are you, o night! It is as if your stars are shackled to mount yadbul (hence they give no light).

#### **Poet 'Antarah ibn Shaddād al-'Absī**

He is 'Antara bn Shaddād ibn 'Umar ibn Mu'awiyah al-'Absī. He is a servant boy who is described as courageous with his involvement in rescuing humans and stock from their captors.

#### **Poem About A Heroic Act By Antara**

Will you not ask the people o daughter of Malik! If indeed you are ignorant of what you appear not to know.

Those who witnessed the battle encounter will tell you that I am severe in battle but I exercise restraint during the sharing of booty.

Praise me for whatever virtue you know surely I am. Easy to disagree with if I am not wronged.

But if I am wronged such will be terrible; its taste is bitter like the 'alqam leaf.

Will you not ask the people o daughter of Malik! If indeed you are ignorant of what you appear not to know.

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#### **Other poets are:**

Abu al-Alaa al-Maarri (973-1057)

Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008)

Iman Mersal (1966 - present)

. Nouri al-Jarrah (1956 - present)

Mohammed Abdel Bari (1985 - present)

Maram al-Masri (1962 – present)

#### **Themes for Creation of Arabic Poems**

Hamāsah (lit. heroic): This theme forms basis for a person or poet to be able to poetically narrate the human experiences of war, internal and external rivalry and a victory celebration. It is like a panegyric in English literature which is better described as Hamasah.

Fakhr - (self- praise): This theme is one that extols virtues of an individual and celebrates achievements and enviable qualities.

Rithā'l — (elegy or dirge): This theme is used to express sorrow and tragedy. Most feminine poets really expressed their pain with this poem of the loss of someone or something valuable.

Madh - (panegyric): This theme achieves the sole aim of celebrating the achievements of an individual or group.

Ghazal - (erotic song): This is theme expresses sexual attractions and affections for a lady most times. when a poet exhibits his affection for a woman in his poetry.

Hijā' - (satire): War has never yielded benefits to the common man. There are records of ancient and modern conflicts between tribes in the Arabian world. This theme lays the basis for such a didactic poem that condemns conflict to be made.

Waṣf (description): As was mentioned in this paper, Arabians formed their literature from

such sources as the environmental features. Wasf is a theme that poets used to build on such poems as pastoral and eco poems.

**Hikmah (wisdom):** The Hikmah is another theme that poets built on to express emotional thoughts about life experiences gotten from the environment and relationships with others.

**I'tidhār (apology):** This type of theme is used to develop poems that can be used to render apology for something done.

### Pre-Islamic Prose

NOUN (2010) mentions that prose text of Arabia before Islam is grouped into 7 forms. The formation of the prosaic text are developed from oration, proverbs, admonitions, incantations, tales, stories, verbal feuds and wise sayings. They are: *alkhiṭābah* (oration) *al-amthāl* (proverbs) *al-hikam* (wise sayings) *alwaṣāyā* (admonitions) *al-munāfarah* (call to arm / verbal feuds) *al-qīṣaṣ* (stories) and *saj'u l-kuhhān* (sorcerer's incantation).

Proverbs and orations which are integral part of a language and culture are the main sources of prose.

The book, *The Arabian Nights (English) One Thousand and One nights (Arabic)* is a clear and concrete example that shows that prose is part of the literature of the Arabs. The tales are about the socio-political life of Arabians and their leaders.

### Modern Arabic Novels

There are thousands of prose forms of literature that have been written and more still will showcase in the near and far future. Some examples are:

*Season of Migration to the North*, by Tayeb Salih, translation by Denys Johnson-Davies  
*Cairo Trilogy*, by Naguib Mahfouz, translation by William Hutchins

*For Bread Alone*, by Mohamed Choukri, translation by Paul Bowles

*The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist*, by Emile Habibi, translation by Salma Khadra Jayyusi

*Children of the Alley*, by Naguib Mahfouz, translation by Peter Theroux

*Zayni Barakat*, by Gamal al-Ghitani, translation by Farouk Abdel Wahab

*Cities of Salt*, by Abdelrahman Munif, translation by Peter Theroux

### Conclusion

Literature as a structure has been described as having a strong motivating power because of its effect on human experience. (Llach 2007) The Arab nations are not overlooked in world affairs. Arabic as the 6th language of the United Nations indicate that the language is not under rated. In the light of this, literary works from Arabic origin have been proliferating libraries around the world, most of them revealing the life experiences of Arabians. Others depict historical and modern issues that have sustain Arabian and others.

In the modern time, during the post Islam period, literature in Arabian language have been extensive. Despite the style of writing that the Arabian language is tailed with, the storylines, the emotions, the themes are globally esteemed.

More need to be done, it is right for writers of Arabic literature to ensure that their works are not limited to just readers of Arabic language but that they are translated in other languages such as English, Spanish, Chinese, French and others so that the message embedded in these texts can be passed on to more audience.

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