

Ibn Ṭabāṭabā [d. 322/933] on the Concept of *Lafz wa-ma'nā* (Word and Meaning) in the Arabic Literary Discourse

Salmon HAKEEM

Department of Foreign Languages, Lagos State University, Ojo, Lagos NIGERIA

Abstract

In ibn Ṭabāṭabā's magnum opus kitāb 'iyār al-shi'r, which epitomizes the earliest systematic theoretical contemplation in medieval Arabic poetics, is encapsulated a plethora of topics on naqd al-shi'r including lafz wa ma'nā. This issue predated Arabic intellectual investigation as it featured conspicuously in autochthonous Hellenistic patrimony as represented by Plato and Aristotle. However, it crept into the oriental literary cosmos through the efforts of the scholastics- the Asharites and Mutazilites - and later assumed by all entrepreneurs of disciplines that have nexus with language, including connoisseurs of literary criticism who were later polarized into various coteries owing to their homogenous views on the issue. This paper will examine, not only the group with which ibn Ṭabāṭabā pitched his tent, but also highlight the taxonomy of defects relating to the issue exploiting descriptive cum analytical touchstones

Keywords: connoisseurs, imitation, occidental, oriental, poetics, scholastics

Exordium

Lafz and ma'nā from morphological perspective are verbal nouns, the roots of which are lafaẓa and anā respectively. According to ibn Manẓūr lafaẓa means to throw something out of the mouth.¹The author of Kitāb al-ta'rīfāt avers that "lāfz is what a person utters a word and ma'nā is the signification and meaning of the word " ². From the foregoing, it is explicitly clear that lafz is the sound or speech that one pronounces from different points of articulation in the mouth through adherence to different manners, while ma'nā stands for the significations and connotations of the sounds made. A wide range of issues attracted the attention of Arab literary wizards in the 4th/10th century. Most of these issues are bipartite in nature; and some of them are listed below: (a) Naturalness and affectation (b) Veracity and mendacity (c) The ancient and the modern (d) Relationship between poetry and religions (e) Relationship between poetry and morals (f) Plagiarism (g) Comparison between two poets (h) Word and meaning.

Lafz wa ma'nā Down the Memory Lane.

The occidentalists: There is a dichotomy in the verdicts of the leading occidental scholars on the concept of lafz wa ma'nā . For instance, Plato (428/ 427- 348/347) gave preference to meaning (consciousness) over matter (word). This stems from his belief and the reliance on the idealist philosophy that consciousness precedes existence³, as meaning is found in the world of forms as opposed to word which represents nothing but an imitation of the idea This is discernible in his postulation “the work of a writer is similar to the work of a mirror whose imitation of things is a photographic mechanism. Therefore what he presents is only false images that we do not need; because what we need and benefit us is the original [meanings], not the images (words)⁴ However his student Aristotle [384-322 BC] observed the issue from an angle which was different from his master as he didn't give preference to any of the two sides; but rather opted for reconciliation and harmonization between the two saying “the word does not represent the image of original [meaning] but is rather original as well in his context.⁵

The Arabs: To state that poetry is the catalyst and impetus for *lafz wa ma'nā* and other critical literary issues among the Arabs is to state the truth. This can be inferred from the universal axiom that says ‘poetry is the Diwan of the Arabs’ owing to its centripetality in all the ramifications of their lives. In fact they used not to wish one another joy but for three things: the birth of a boy, the coming to light of a poet and the foaling of a noble mare. In light of this, the position occupied by poetry among the Arabs was the main factor behind the emergence of many critical issues; the aim of which was to improve this poetry and preserve its artistic and aesthetic values. Of all the literary issues earlier mentioned, *lafz wa ma'nā* is the most important. And this issue has divided the Arabs critics into three groups: a group giving preference to the words, another group giving preference to the meanings, yet another seeing both as complementary and inextricably interwoven. For instance al-Jāhiz [d.255] who was the first among the Arabs to beam his searchlight on the issue appreciates that speech is the practical manifestation of the abstract existence of language.⁶ He likens them to ‘body and soul’ that must co-exist.⁷ No wonder that he declares ‘whoever wants a noble meaning; let him seek a noble word. For it is because the right of a honorable meaning is a honorable word. ⁸

Ibn Qutaybah [d 276] intersects with al-Jāhiz as he appreciates the cohesion of meaning and word within the framework of a single formulation.⁹ He thus classified poetry into four on the basis of lafz wa-ma'nā as follows:¹⁰

- i. One of dignified words and dignified meanings
- ii. One of dignified words and undignified meanings
- iii. One of undignified words and dignified meanings
- iv. One of undignified words and undignified meanings

From the classification above, it is obvious that any poetry that matches the first class (i.e dignified words and dignified meanings) is the best while the worst is the one that falls under the fourth category (i.e undignified words and undignified meaning).

Ibn Ṭabāṭabā, Iyār al-shi'r on Lafz wa ma'nā

Notice ibn Ṭabāṭabā is given in a number of bio-bibliographical sources.¹¹ Many aspects of his social life are shrouded in mystery, as none of the sources gives information on his time of birth, social life and education. However, what is crystal clear is that he must have received his education in Isfahan, his birth place since there was no record of him ever leaving the place.¹² His works include :¹³

- i. Tahdhib al-Ṭab –Refinement of Disposition
- ii. Kitab al-'Arud –The Book of Prosody
- iii. Al madkhal ilā ma'arif al-mu'ammā min al-shi'r –Introduction to the Knowledge of Obscure Poetry
- iv. Fi Taqrīz al-dafātir – In Praise of Scripts
- v. Sanām al-ma'ālī - The Summit of Excellence
- vi. Diwan shi'rih – The Anthology of his poetry
- vii Al-shi'r wa- ishu'ara' –Poetry and Poets
- viii 'Iyār al-shi'r – The touchstone of Poetry

However, 'Iyār al-shi'r is the only work of ibn Ṭabāṭabā that has survived. But it is still possible for us to establish, albeit tenuously, the nature of his extinct works largely from reference to them in Iyār. He died at Isfahan in 322/934 ¹⁴

'Iyār al-shi'r was written in response to one Abū al-Qāsim who approached ibn Ṭabāṭabā for researching about the art of poetry ¹⁵ It contains five major topics viz:

- i. Tradition of the Arabs on simile
- ii. Moral standard among the Arabs
- iii. The touchstone of poetry
- iv. Types of simile correlation between words and meaning
- v. Correlation between word and meaning (the fulcrum of this paper)

Ibn Ṭabāṭabā's opinion on the subject of **lafz wa ma'nā** portray him as a moderate critic as his argument corroborates the fact that he attaches equal importance to both word and meaning , and that the nobility of one could be impaired by the ignobility of the other. For instance, his classification of Arabic poetry is hinged on the concept of lafz wa ma'nā . This is perceptible from his declaration :

Wa min al-ash'ār ash'ār muḥkamat, mutqanat , aniqat al-alfāz , ḥakīmat al-ma'ānī, 'ajibat al-ta'lif,

“ the first type of poetry is well and meticulously constructed poetry, the diction of which is elegant, the meaning wise and the composition wonderful so that when it is made into prose, its excellent meaning is not invalidated and its strong diction not lost”
He likens this kind of poetry to well-constructed buildings that cannot be easily demolished.

Of the second type of poetry, ibn Ṭabātabā declares :

*wa minhā ash'ār mumawwāhat, muzakharafat 'adibat, tarūq al-'asmā' wa l-afhām idhā marrat ṣafha , fa idhā huṣilat wantuqīdat, bahrajat ma'ānīhā wa zayyafat alfāzihā*¹⁷

“The second type of poetry is deceptively ornate and sweet poetry that appeals to the senses on the surface, but of which the diction is found to be corrupt and the meaning detective when it is exposed and examined”

The artistic principles underlying this classification are the lafz wa ma'nā (word and meaning), the composition of both and the pliability of poetry in being made into prose while maintaining its plausibility as a literary text as a literary text. Furthermore it should be noted that the second type, which he likens to tents that degenerate easily, could not be prosified.

Defects Relating to lafz wa ma'nā

Ibn Tabataba as a moderate critic postulates the variables - words and meanings - are siamese twins who are inseparable. The two must be simultaneously dignified, as the bereftness of nobility in one of them would render the sundry poetry undignified. He therefore enumerates the category of detective usage that could emanate from poor lafz and ma'anā. He classified such defects into three broad categories

(a) Faults relating to lafz alone : he identifies two categories here and illustrates them as follows

i tafāwut al-nasj : This is applicable in a situation in which a uniform pattern of word order is not followed. He illustrates this type with a line of al-A'shā in which there is a case of inversion in the second hemistich and none in the first¹⁸

A fi al-tawwāf khift 'alayya al-radā , wa kam man radī ahalah lam yarim

“Do you, because of continuous journeys, fear my destruction? Many had perished without leaving their domain”

ii radā'at al-nasj [poor composition] : This entails tautology i.e extravagance in the use of word by saying the same thing twice over in different words. This is illustrated with a verse by Abū 'i-'iyāl al-Hudhali¹⁹

dhakartu akhī fa āwadanī ṣudāc al-ra's wa 'l-waṣab

“I remembered my brother for which headache and fatigue clave perseveringly to me”.

The occurrence of “ra’s” with “ṣudā” [head and headache] has rendered the line ignoble.

a) Faults relating to ma’nā :

I. *Al-ash’ār al-bāridat al-ma’ānī* [verses with dull motifs]

Ibn Ṭabāṭabā gives an ode of seventy six verses excepting six there of by Al-ash’ār as representative of this category owing to his belief that the poem is bereft of any artistic ideas.²⁰

i *sū’ al-ibtidā’* (poor opening) : the word of exordial verses of a poem must be carefully selected to bowdlerise it of any offensive expression, especially if the addressee is a living auditor. Ibn Ṭabāṭabā illustrates this defect with the opening line of Dhū al-Rumma’s works²¹

Mā bāl ‘aynīk minhā ‘l-mā’ yansakīb ? ka’annah mim kulā mafriyyat sakab

“why does your eye shed tears copiously ? As if it were a slit skin bag”

Dhū al-Rumma addressed this line to caliph Abdul-malik who had bad eyes with watery discharge. The caliph felt insulted by the poet indiscreet opening and ordered him out of his court.

ii *mushākkalah* (thematic harmony) : in the expression of poetic ideas, only those themes with appropriate relationship should be brought together. And when need be, intra linear transition between related themes should be carefully carried out in an obtrusive manner. The following verse by Ṭarafa is considered a breach of this principle.²²

wa lastu bihallāl al-tallāc makhāfah , wa lākin matā yastrafid al-qawm arfid

“I do not settle on hills out of fear; whenever [any] people seek assistance, I give assistance “

The first hemistich here has set out to extol courage in a way that anticipates a corresponding complement, however the second hemistich is expressing an entirely different idea i.e benevolence, hence the verse is considered as lacking *mushākkalah*.

ii *abyāt zādat qārihat qā’ilihā ‘alā ‘uqūlihim* (verses with more ingeniousness than sense) : Ibn Ṭabāṭabā illustrates this category with a verse from Jarīr²³

hādhā bn ‘ammī fi Dimashq khalīfah ; law shi’t sāqakum ilayy qaṭīna

“over there is my cousin, a caliph in Damascus; if I had wished, he would have driven you all to me as slaves.”

The Verse is a reflection of poor artistic imagination because Jarīr is unwillingly portraying himself as superior to the caliph who acts at his beck and will.

iii *Al-ghuluww fi al-tashbih* (hyperbolic simile) : hyperbolic simile is repugnant as it will reduce the credibility of the message the poet is putting across. He exemplifies this type with the following illustrations from al- Nābigah al-Dhubaynī.²⁴

Takhdhī bihim adam ka'anna rihālahā , 'alaq urīqa 'alā mutūn ṣawār

“they journey on white camels whose saddles are like blood poured on the back of onagers.”

The fault here lies in the likening of red saddle to flowing blood.

vi *Al-ighrāq fi al-ma'nā* (hyperbolic meaning) : he cites here a verse by al-Ja'dī as example²⁵

Balaghna al-samā' majdah wa takarruma , wa innā lanarjū fawqa dhālika mazhara

“We reach the sky by virtue of our generosity and nobility; and we wish above that a more exalted place after the sky”.

Whereas it is obvious that the sky is the farthest point attainable to man.

vii *Al-ishārāh al-ba'idah* (far -fetched allusions). This requires the poet to avoid figures of speech whose signification cannot be attained without effort. Ibn Ṭabāṭabā exemplifies with these lines which al-Muthaqqib put in the mouth of his camel²⁶

Taqūlu wa qad dara'at lahā waḍīnī , a adhā dīnuh Abadan wa dīnī ? a kulla dahr hall wa tarhāl , fa mā yabqā 'alayya wa lā yaqīnī

“She says when I laid my girth on it, will this ever be his habit and mine? Will it be ever like this [now] sojourning [now] travelling, couldn't he spare me and protect me? “

Personification (as employed here) whereby a poet depicts a camel as a talking beast with ability to express strong emotions and feeling is overblown, and as such must be avoided.

c *Faults relating to both lafz and ma'nā*

Al-shi'r al-qāsir 'an al-ghāyah (Poem marred by inadequacy of meaning) Imprecise allusion can render a poem artistically defective. Ibn Ṭabāṭabā illustrates this type of fault with a line by al-Nābigah al-Dhubaynī²⁷

Māḍī al-janān , akhī ṣabr idhā nazalat ḥarb yuwā'il minhā kullu tinbāl

“strong-willed, enduring; whenever a war break out, he provides refuge for every short man”

That a short man, rather than a tall is a seeker of refuge is not artistic.

Conclusion

The vocal point of this paper is lafz and ma'nā which could be aptly tagged the nucleus of the circle of literary issues among the Arab literary virtuosos in the 4th/10th century. Views vacillate and stands oscillate on the raging issue, culminating in the dichotomization of the connoisseurs into the extremists who give preference to either of the variables; and the moderate who see the variables as a reminiscence of 'soul and body' which are complementary , and -ipso facto- sine qua non to the survival of man. Ibn

Ṭabāṭabā aligns with the latter and adopts its hypothesis in the taxonomy of bellistic defects and artistic disequilibriums associated with Arabic poetry. However, it is deducible from his illustrations on the defects that he seems not to appreciate the poetic effect embodied in personification or pathetic fallacy commonly embraced by his outstanding contemporaries. It may also be germane here to aver that some verses condemned by Ibn Ṭabāṭabā are commonly cited by other outstanding authorities as fault free. Sanni, even, gives an instance in which “one usage faulted by ibn Ṭabāṭabā has a corresponding illustration from the Holy Qur’ān, the most authoritative linguistic source of it”²⁸. However, this would not in any way attenuate his encyclopedic erudition or tarnish his immaculate scholarly reputation. Ibn Ṭabāṭabā as an idealist literary theorist who sees utopianism as ignis fatuus, seems to have a premonition of susceptibility of any works of human being to error when one ruminates on his aphoristic apothegm: “.....nuqqād (the literary critics) and fuqahā’ (the jurists) are like the physicians, who could cure an illness, but who are nonetheless liable to mistakes”²⁹

References

- 1 Ibn manzūr, *Lisān al-Arab*, Bayrūt, Dār al-Şādir, 3rd ed., 1414, 6/261.
- 2 Sharīf, al-Jurjānī, *kitāb al-taʿrīfāt*, Bayrūt, Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyyah, 1983, 3/162.
- 3 Shukrī Azīz al-Māḍī, *Fī nazariyyah al-adab*, Dār muntakhab al-arabī, 1993, p. 142.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p.143
- 5 *Ibid.*, p.144
- 6 Al-Akhdar Jamʿī, *al-Lafẓ wa 'l-maʿnā fī al-tafkīr al-naqdī wa 'l-balāghī ʿind al-arab*, Dimashq, 2001, p.29.
- 7 al-Jāhīz, *al-Bayān wa 'l-tabyīn*, ed. Abd al-Sallām Hārūn, Cairo, Maktabah al-khānījī, 1975, 3/203.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 204
- 9 Ibn Qutaybah, *al-shiʿr wa 'l-shuʿarāʾ*, Bayrūt, Dār Iḥyāʾ al-ulūm, 1984, p.55 .
- 10 *Ibid.*, p.57
- 11 Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muʿjam al-udabāʾ*, (ed.) Morgoliouth, Cairo, 1930, 6/284, Khayr al-Dīn al-Zirkilī, *al-Aʿlām*, 18th ed., Bayrūt, 1969, 6/199., Umar Riḍā Kaḥālah, *Muʿjam al-muʿallifīn*, Dimashq, 1959, 8/312
- 12 Ibn Ṭabāṭabā, *Iyār al-shiʿr*, ed. Abbas Abd al-Sātīr, Bayrūt, Dār al-kutub al-ʿilmiyyah, 1983, p.3.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 Iḥsān Abbās, *Tārīkh al-naqd al-adabī ind al-arab*, Ammān, Dār al-shurūq 1993, p.121
- 15 Wen-Chin Ouyang, *Literary Criticism in Medieval Arabic Islamic Culture*, Edinburgh University Press, 1997, p. 113
- 16 ibn Ṭabāṭabā,, *Op. cit*, p.13.
- 17 *Ibid.*

- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 44.
- 19 *Ibid.* , p. 105
- 20 *Ibid.*, pp.71-76.
- 21 *Ibid.* p. 127.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 130.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 195.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 93.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p.123.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 102.
- 28 Amidu Sanni, *al-Marzubānī in the Context of Arabic Literary Theory : An Analytical Study of al-Muwashshah*, a PhD thesis submitted to the University of London, 1989, p.229
- 29 Wen-Chin Ouyang , Op. cit. , p.114.

Biographical Note

Salmon HAKEEM is a staff of Department of Foreign Languages, Lagos State University, Ojo, Lagos NIGERIA Email hakeem.salmon@lasu.edu.ng, hasbyrabby66@yahoo.com