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# EXISTENCE OF ARABIC 'ADAB' (BELLES-LETTRES): A LINGUISTIC STUDY

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### **ABSTRACT**

In Arabic language the term 'adab' bears the sense of literature; and it has gradual development in the passage of times and periods. In the Pre-Islamic period, it carried only the sense of 'banquet' or 'feast' and in the Islamic period, the term 'adab' started to mean "polite manners" or "culture" signifying the importance of acquiring knowledge for socio-cultural affairs of the human society. In fact, from the period of the Umayyad dynasty, the term 'adab' is meant for literature; as and when different genres of literary works came to existence. In this connection, it has been observed that the Arab lexicographers happened to mean the term 'adab' as 'culture', of which testimony finds in all the literary works of prose and poetry that accepted by the human hearts and finally it leads to the meaning of aesthetic literature, known as 'belles-lettres'.

**KEYWORDS:** 'Adab', Literature, Linguistic, Belles-Lettres Etc

### INTRODUCTION

Arabic language is the lingua franca of the Arab world. Right from the pre-Islamic period to the modern age Arabic literary genres are being produced by the people of Arab world including Persia and the people of Arabic scholars of different tract of lands of the world and their productions are supposed to consider as 'Arabic literature'. In this connection, we find a distinct word 'adab' which is meant for 'culture' or 'refinement' by the Arab lexicographers; and in course of times it is meant for all the literary works of prose and poetry that accepted by the human hearts. (1) In fact, the term 'adab' comes in singular and  $\hat{a}d\hat{a}b$  in plural number. In parallel to this term, we may refer to the word 'belles-lettres' which is used in English literature. The word 'adab' denotes to all elements of educative literature, which are full of good manners, refinement, decency, humanity, humaneness, seemliness including all good qualities of literary beauty for human being. As such, it gives to us a clear comprehension of tales, stories and anecdotes of the Arabs and non-Arabs, proverbs and essays which are designed to entertain reform and discipline. (2) Here it may be reiterated that the literary notion of belles-lettres is linked to the concept of 'adab' in Arabic literature. The Arabic term 'adab' has undergone gradual transformation in meaning over the past centuries. In fact, 'adab' has been familiar to the equivalent of the English word 'literature' as it gives literary services to the human society. Briefly speaking, the familiar literary topics like style, structuralism, pessimism, aesthetics, prizes, love, war, religion, symbolism, poetry, emotion, woman, drama, criticism, modernism, romanticism, death, and realism are also brought to the consistence of the subheading of 'adab' in the famous book entitled al-fihrist (Index) composed by Abû'l-Faraj Muhammad ibn Ishâq ibn Abî Ya'qûb al-Nadim (d. 996 A.D.). (3)

# Description

It has been observed that the Arabic term 'adab' gives a full picture of human society by means of literary elements like prose and poetry, drama and novel, fiction and essays covering all sorts of written documents, which imparts

every type of information in various modes of expressions. The socio-cultural scenario of a society or a nation is reflected in the contents of literature. The comprehensive socio-cultural affairs appear in the vast ranges of literary genres of Arabic 'adab' and it plays the great role as a back-bone of Arab nations to signify their different literary genres.

Here mention may be made that the Arabic term 'adab' was familiar with Arabian people in the meaning of 'literature' of the modern age since 9th century A.D. It is significant to note that although the usage of this term was in vogue in the pre-Islamic period, but it was used in other sense, of which testimony appeared in the verse of Tarafa Ibn al-'Abd (d. 564 A.D.) as follows:

Nahnu Fîl-Mushtât Nad Û Al-Jaflâ Lâ Tarâ Al-Adab Fînâ Yantagiru

(In the season of winter i.e. usually a famine time, we invite the people of our tribe in general who are cordially invited for banquet, you would not find (them) amongst us to be disappeared.) (4)

Pointing to the word 'adab' mentioned in the verse of Tarafa, Ahmad al-Shâ' ib is of the opinion that the classical poetry authenticated the appearance of the term 'adab' to mean 'manners' or culture and it was acquainted with the people having comprehension in the Pre-Islamic period. Right from the Pre-Islamic to Early Islamic periods the term 'adab' was meant for 'culture' as well. In this connection, we find that the term is meant for "good manner or "good human character", of which testimony is found in a good number of the Prophetic Traditions. (5)

Here mention may be made that the term 'adab' is not employed in the Holy Qur'ân, but the term *ma'duba* is conspicuous in the prophetic tradition to mean 'polite manners' and the hadith is reported by IbnMas'ûd, as he quotes: *inna hadhâ'l-qur'ân ma'dubah Allâh fîl-ard fa-ta 'allamû min ma'dubatihi*. (6)

(Verily this Qur'ân is an entertainment (i.e. literature) of Allah in the earth, so learn from its festivity.)

Here the term *ma'duba* linguistically means *al-da'wah ilâ al-walâ'im* "an invitation to banquet". As a matter of fact, the word is interpreted by some scholars as "meal prepared for invitees" while it is supposed to be derived from the root adab (*a-d-b*) and in this implication the noted lexicographer of the traditions, Ibn al-Athîr (d. 1233 A.D.) said: "*hiyâ al-ţa'âm alladhî yaṣna'ahu al-rajul yad'u ilayhi al-nâs.*" (It is the repast which is made by the man to invite the people.) (7)

In fact, the quotation was not proposed to mean 'literary work'. Because it lexically means – "manners" or "culture", but it signifies the importance of acquiring knowledge achieved in the socio-cultural affairs of the human society.

# Analysis of the Term 'Adab'

It is imperative to know that with the passage of long centuries the term 'adab' has been applied to be specific word for signifying literature in the modern age. Gradually it developed to such an extent that it comprehended the present meaning "literature" having rolling down over the centuries from the lexical meaning "habit" or "customs" or "culture" etc. As stated above, in the present literary context, the word 'adab' is used in the singular number and its plural is âdâb. In matters of evolution of this word, the linguists supposed that the term adab has been formed from dâb after its necessary transposition of letters. In this connection, Dr. Tâhâ Husayn (d. 1973) follows the opinion of the oriental scholars like Professor Nallino and others who opine that the term adab has been discovered from its original root word dâb in the singular number and its plural term has been considered as âdab and in fact, after the transposition of letters dâb was pronounced as adab having supposed in the singular number and its plural âdâb. In this connection we find an assertion

made by Dr. Tâhâ Hussayn as follows:

In fact, our Professor Nallino is of the opinion in respect of derivation of this term that it was derived from dâb which means 'habit' and it has been observed that this term was not derived from a word of singular number, because it was derived from a word of plural number, while dâb keeps plural adâb, then it has been transformed as it was said âdâb as the terms bi'r and ri'm which have been made plural as abâr and arâm and then changed and it was said âbâr and ârâm. Professor Nallino said: al- âdâb has been used at large scale as plural number for dâb, even the Arab people have forgotten the origin of this plural and the change therein that has crept in. An imagination has been made for them that it was made plural, no change was there. Then they accepted there from (âdâb) its singular adab, not from dâb. The usage of this term continued in the meaning of 'habit', therefore it has been changed into different senses from its previous meaning.)<sup>(8)</sup>

The word *adab* has acquired its new shades of meaning during the Umayyad period, while the human attitude towards learning and knowledge was getting advancing day by day and then it started comprehending all the literary works irrespective of prose and poetry. As referred to earlier, if the word *adab* is brought under discussion in the light of the Prophetic tradition, and then we definitely find it to be derived from the root (a-d-b). In this connection, we may cite the following Prophetic Traditions as a testimony:

- addabanî rabbî fa-ahsana ta'dibî (My Lord taught me, so I learnt nicely).
- laisa min mu'addib illâ huwa yahubbu an yu'addiya adabahu (There is no tutor except that he loves to fulfill his social decency.)
- mâ fa 'ala wâlid waladahu afdal min adab hasan(A father does nothing better to his son than to mould him with good behaviour.)
- mâ nahala wâlid waladahu nahlân afḍal min adab hasan(A father can give nothing better to his son a gift except his nourishment of polite manner, i.e. a father's best donation to his son is his nourishment with polite manner) (9)

So, it has been observed that the root (a-d-b) in the II stem of derivative measure turns into addaba "to teach" which is interpreted in Arabic as tathqif "to educate or make cultured". Thus many words came to formation having derived from the root of (a-d-b) and thus the term mu'addib also appears in the Prophet Muhammad's saying, as stated above, which means "one who teaches the discipline of the mind and manners". Another meaning of it is "tutor" who performs his duty remaining at home in the teaching of various subjects related to poetry, history, and in imparting words of wisdom to point out morality, interpretation of the thematic purport and description of the masterpiece value at length. To be a good scholar and a respected personality, there is an importance for the human being to have deep acquaintance with poetry and perfect knowledge of the Arabic language. Actually it is referred to the cultural aspect, while poetry bears literary trends consisting of criticism of life. In fact, poetry was the foundation stone of culture and civilization in Arabic life. As such, an inference may be drawn here that the term adab has comprehended the sense of "good manner" and "interpretation of life". In this connection, the well-learned Umayyad Caliph 'Abd al-Malik bin Marwân(d. 705 A.D.) once told the tutor of his sons that he should teach them poetry so that they may be noble and great. Furthermore, 'Umar bin 'Abd-al-'Azîz (d. 720 A.D.) , after being received of all-round educations related to academic, literary and cultural aspects and the Caliph asked his teacher (mu'addib) as follows: kaifa kânat ţâ'atî iyyâka wa anta tu'addibunî? (How was my obedience to you, while you were teaching me?) (10)

Here it would be better to clarify the meaning and implication of the term *mu'addib* that has been derived from the root (a-d-b). Most of the scholars are of the opinion that it technically signifies such a teacher who devoted to himself to teach poetry, orations, genealogy, history and other subjects of science and arts including *tafsîr*, *fiqh*, and *hadîth*.

# **DISCUSSION**

It is observed that the word had two parallel meanings "manners" and "discipline" while the former is said to mean kindness, the quality of generosity, morality, polite accomplishments etc. in society, and the latter to mean educational affairs, that is, to teach and to acquire knowledge of poetry and prose, or which may be connected with these two forms of literature. Here we find a conception which could not take poetry as something apart from life. It is said to have been a serious preoccupation with the art of life. As indicated earlier the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad appealed to human reason and faculty to get cultured and educated with polite manners.

When the Abbasids came to power Arabic language had become crystallized and literature took on a new refinement and Bedouin elements of terseness and incisiveness gave way to elegance and richness. The philosophy and sciences of Greece and India widened its scope and range, and new sciences of Philology, Lexicography, and the grammar of Arabic language were brought in black and white along with new terms into their consistencies. As mentioned earlier, the 'adab' comprises of prose and poetry along with its other elements like morphology, syntax, philology, rhetoric, criticism, cultural history, and annals too. (11)

Literature consists of human insight and art of speech. It is the combination of words made by poets, orators and writers who contain minute imaginations as well as discreet meanings in their literary elements of works in view of giving instructions to the human souls with delicate senses and feelings and teaching them language.

Literature grows directly out of life under some impulses which give birth to various forms of literary expression. Generally it expresses the thoughts and feelings of writer dealing with the great drama of human life and action. As such, William Henry Hudson defines language as "it is a vital record of what men have seen in life, what they have experienced of it, what they have thought and felt about those for all of us".<sup>(12)</sup>

From the point of verbal expressions, literature is found in two categories: (i) imaginative or fictional works having demands of artistic value, and (ii) certain non-fictional works of exalted artistic quality. Generally literature is supposed to be in written documents, but in some specific sense, it may be oral also.

Looking at the aforementioned discussion, we can assume that imaginative literature comprises poetry, legends and folk-tales, drama, short stories and novels. Literary non-fictional may include almost any writing except the strictly technical. Religious scriptures - such as the Qur'ân, the Bible and the Vedas are of traditional genus of literature. In addition to these, many essays, biographies, histories, scientific works and philosophical writings have artistic qualities which come to be known as literary genre.

Therefore, it reveals from the definitions given by different authors, writers and distinguished scholars that literature should carry the following four components:

- It should provide the readers with entertainment.
- It should be free from dull environment or in other words, it should have some moral or spiritual values, which
  may be expressed or implied in nature.

- It should possess the capacity to acquaint the readers with social forces which motivate people.
- It should systematize human experiences imparting aesthetic pleasure to the readers thereby.

There was no systematic prose literature during Pre-Islamic period (500 - 622 A.D). All characteristics of this period are faithfully and vividly reflected only in the form of songs and odes which have come down to us by oral tradition. Hence the poets had the privilege to sing the history of their own people, to record their genealogies, to celebrate their feats of arms, and to extol their virtues.

It has been observed that literature during Pre-Islamic period was mainly produced on lyric poetry, which, though not written down at that time, was preserved by oral tradition and, later on, committed to writing after a period of two-three hundred years. As regards prose, one of the literary arts, it could hardly exist and whatever prose form found at that time be reckoned with (a) proverbs (b) traditions (c) orations and legends. These traditions and legends bear the elements of history and romance in the prose narratives used by the rhapsodists to introduce and set forth plainly the matter of their songs, and in the legends which recounted the glorious deeds of tribes and individuals. Pagan Arabs evinced a decided taste for tales a fact, not at all, uncommon in the infancy of the human race and Abû 'Ubayda (d. 639 A.D), as the teller of the stories of the pagan days, was without an equal.

Apart from the elements found in the Pre-Islamic period the miraculous Qur'ân, the Prophetic Tradition, letters and history during the days of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) and his four rightly guided Caliphs, brought about new trends in the field of 'adab'.

During Umayyad period the progress in prose literature and learning was little but not barren. It is observed that the main components of the prose literature of this period are: speeches, letters, grammar, prose, poetry, *al-hadith* (The Prophetic Tradition), *al-fiqh* (The Jurisprudence), *al-tafsîr* (The Commentary) and *al-târîkh*, (The Historiography). The Umayyad prose displays, in style and diction, a high standard of excellence and deserves to be placed in the highest category of the available specimens of classical Arabic literature.

It is already pointed out that 'Adab' i.e. *belles-lettres* along with literary history is represented by the whole series of valuable works that soothe the human taste and temperament. In this connection, the Persian Rûzbih, better known as 'Abdullah Ibnu' I-Muqaffa' (d. 759 A.D) made several translations from the Pehlavi literature into Arabic and his famous book entitled *Kalîla wa Dimna* is ultimately derived from the Sanskrit 'fables' entitled *Panchatantra* by Bidpai'. Arabic version is one of the oldest prose works in the Arabic language, and is justly regarded as a model of elegant style, though it has not the pungent brevity which marks true Arabian eloquence. The writer has brought the themes of the stories to the human understanding, for which he personified the inanimate things and animals to the level of rational beings. This work shows that he had strong literary ability in the realm of Arabic literature which led to the development of Arabic pure *adab* (belles-lettres). (13)

Here mention may be made that during the third century of Hijra the *adab* was applied to the pure literary form of Prose and Poetry which also consisted of genealogy, annals and critical verdicts. If the permanent value of pure literature be considered, we are bound to acknowledge the literary masterpieces and critical collections which were compiled and written by the literary giants such as *al-bayân-wa-al-tabyîn* of Jahiz (d. 255 A.H.), *al-shi'r-wa-al-shu'arâ'* "Book of poetry and Poets", *kitâb al-ma'ârif* "Book of general knowledge" and *adabu'l-kâtib* "Accomplishment of the secretary" of Ibn Qutayba (d.276 A.H.), *al-kâmil* of al-Mubarrad (d. 285 A.H.) and *tabaqât al-shu'arâ'* of Muhammad Ibn-Sallâm (d. 231

A.H.). As a term Adab was also used in the general prospect of literature which brought humanistic sciences, academic works, fine arts and mathematics into its consistence. These literary arts are said to have been important elements for building up the culture and developing the civilization of social life. In this connection, Hassan-bin-Sahal (d. 236 A.H.), a minister of Abbasid Dynasty, further added that certainly *al-adab* led to the development of literary forms. To him, medicine, geometry, equitation, music, chess, polo, mallet, poetry, genealogies, annals and views of people on these subjects were the subject matter of literature. Speaking of the contents of belles-lettres, Prof. Iqbal Husayn adds further as follows: "Other literary forms which were not 'pure literature' but were necessary for sustaining the knowledge of the men of letters, and to be considered as cultured, being authorities of literature, were philosophy, genealogy, grammar, annals, religious sciences, philology and criticism." (14)

In fact, during the fourth century of Hijra the theme of *adab* was well recognized as *belles-lettres* or literature as and when the literary criticism developed by various scholars who made discussion on the beauty of prose and poetry. In this connection, we find some works namely *kitâb al-sinâ 'atain* of Abu Hilâl al-Hasan al-'Askarî (d. 1005 CE), *al-'umda* of Ibn Rashiq (d. 1071 A.D) and *al-naqd al-shi'r* of Qudamâ' bin-Ja'far (d. 337 A.H/ 948 A.D). They tried their best to keep recognition of *adab* at the culminated position in the realm of Arabic literature. As such, the word *adab* (literature) signifies only the employment of the intellectual works excluding philosophy and religious sciences.

It appears from the foregoing discussion that the concept of *adab* (belles-lettres) has been limited to an extent in the whole range of Arabic literature and a distinction is maintained between books which are literary in particular and those which are not strictly literary. In such way a boundary line is drawn between the religious literature and the intellectual works including social sciences and *belles-lettres*. In fact, the clear conceptual definition of *adab* (literature) has been made by some distinguished scholars who made their modest effort in their respective works as follows:

- miftâh al-'ulûmof Sakaki (d. 626 A.H.)
- majma 'al-udabâ' of Yaqût (d.626 A.H.)
- sharah al-miftâhof SarîfJurjânî (d.816 A.H.)
- kashf al-zunûn of HâjjiKhalfah (d.1657 A.D.)
- asrâr al-balâgha of Zamakhsharî (d. 538 A.H.) (15)

But the study reveals that the above mentioned works could highlight on the term *adab* (literature) either to the significant or insignificant extent. The definition of the renowned Spanish writer, Ibn Khaldûn (816 A.H.) is praiseworthy; who explained the term with a clear language in his famous book of history of world civilization entitled *al-muqaddama* and his intellectual personality was akin to the age of just before modern period in respect of giving overall information to define *adab* (literature). He mentioned the sciences of Arabic language in three parts namely grammar, philology and rhetoric and thereafter defined the subject matter of literature and its range of scope. His remark in this aspect follows:

There is no subject matter of which this art can be produced to prove its positive or negative attitude. Its object in the opinion of the students of the language is its advantage. It is a contemplation of beauty in the art of prose and poetry according to the styles of the Arabs and their performance in them. (16)

It appears from afore-said excerpt that Ibn Khaldûn excluded literature from other related sciences and could not put forth a clear and comprehensive definition. He recognized only those subject matters which dealt with formal and

cultural affairs in accordance with their nature. He failed to explain literature due to his inability to express his ideas in words. Actually literature consists of human interest, the element of form and pleasure, aesthetic satisfaction in its thematic contents, but these were not clearly described by Ibn Khaldûn. Undoubtedly, he had an artistic sense in mind but he could not present it in a lucid manner in his words.

It is worth-mentioning that the classical writers or critics lacked adequate idea of literature in their mind that the different types of literature viz. prose, poetry and achievements in written form with an intellectual mode of expression and artistic manners. They were indifferent to literary elements like emotion, imagination, thought, interpretation of life, desire for self-expression, interest in people and their doings, or interest in the world of reality in which a man lives. In fact, if their works, either prose or poetry, are brought to critical examination, we will find their awareness only in the imaginative quality of literature and its expression.

It is observed that Ahmad Shâ'ib tried his best to mean the term *adab* as literature which he clearly highlighted in his work entitled *uslûb al-naqd al-'arabî*, the most competent work for a study of the words *adab* and *naqd*. Undoubtedly this notion is akin to the interpretation of modern period. According to him, the Western also employed the word 'literature' in the general sense of *adab*. (17) Furthermore, it is noticed that his implication has also been carried out by the distinguished scholar, Hudson who expressed in his words as follows:

"Literature is composed of those books, and of those books only, which in the first place, by reason of their subject-matter and their mode of treating it, are of general human interest; and in which, in the second place, the element of form and the pleasure which form gives are to be regarded as essential." (18)

# **CRITICAL VIEWS**

It is clear from the above discussion that both the words *adab* and 'literature' are meant the same sense and as viewed by most of the modern Arabic litterateurs who studied French and English literature. So, they were influenced by the Western culture and literature to a great extent, for which they could not differentiate between both the aforesaid words. As for the modern Arabic literature is concerned, Al-'Aqqâd(d. 1964 A.D) and Al-Mâzinî(d. 1949 A.D) were pioneer critics and true followers of the Romantic Movement of French and of English literature. Here, we find both of them to support the modern theories of literature as appeared in their different works. Dr. Tâhâ Husayn has also opposed the classical absolute standards and established conventions and began to shake of the shackles of the classical authorities. His argument goes for the acquisition of French literary theories with the expectations to examine Arabic Literature in the light of modern European theories. But the literary giant, Syed Qutub(d. 1966 A.D) made contradiction to the critics, influenced by the Western theories and placed his advocacy in such a way that literature lives by virtue of the life which it embodies, so, the interpretation of life should be scintillated with light of the Qur'ân as it sheds to diffuse notion and concept, while literature is highly appreciated for bringing good expression and representing ideal picture of life into its subject. (19) Furthermore, we find other men of letters like Dr. Ahmad Amin (d. 1954 C.E.), Dr. Mandûr (d.1965 A.D), Shauqi Daif (d. 2005 A.D) and so on who supported the European literary trends. In this connection, Dr. Muhammad Mandûr adds his views in his work entitled *al-adab wa madhâhibuhu* as follows:

In fact, the conventional significance of adab i.e. literature to the Arabs was never recognized as philosophical emergence, until the contemporary awakening began and gave definition of the significance of literature and its arts through our education and cultural manners. As a result, the definition was very trivial. It is said that literature is poetry,

artistic prose, prose of lectures, letters, assemblies and proverbs. This definition does not draw a boarder -line of the principles and objects of literature.... The Westerners were not content with this scholastic definition, but went to recognize literature with a philosophical definition which draws attention to its sources, objects and principles. There are many definitions which differ from each other on account of their ideologies regarding literature, and because of their diversity, in the philosophical point of view too. (20)

### **CONCLUSION**

Here mention may be made that the Arabian people signify the term *adab* to mean different literary aspects, although in the *Jahiliyyah* period, it meant only 'an invitation to feast' as indicated earlier in the poetical verse of Tarafa Ibn al-'Abd (d. 564 A.D.) And in the Pre-Islamic and Islamic periods it meant "polite manners" and good behaviors that lay influence on common and specific life. The same is applied to mean education to a soul or man that can lead him to noble qualities, knowledge and poetry. From 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D. onwards it has been used to signify all sciences and arts like philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, alchemy, medical science, history, genealogy, poetry etc. pertaining to the august knowledge made for betterment of social relation. From 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. the term 'adab' has been used for poetry and prose and those which are related to both of them like syntax, linguistic sciences, rhetoric, prosody and literary criticism.

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