

THE ARABS JOURNEYS TO
THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

(Kingdom of Saudi Arabia)

by

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Arabs excelled other surpassing nations by their contribution in the field of Journeys. The extensiveness of the Islamic nation, its flourishing in commerce, agriculture, progress in scientific and cultural arena helped them in achieving their goal. Moreover, the religious factor which motivates moslems to go for pilgrimage and visiting the sacred shrines helped enrich the Arabic library with dozens of manuscript and printed books on Journeys that confirm the ancient Arabs interest in this kind of writing.

Some researchers classified Journeys according to their subjects namely:

(1) Hejazi Journeys. (2) Tourist trips (3) Official trips. (4) Scholastic trips. (5) Monuments trips. (6) Exploratory journeys. (7) Visiting trips. (8) Political journeys. (9) Shrines trips. (10) Indexed journeys. (11) Scientific journeys. (12) Itinerary journeys. (13) Imaginative journeys. (14) Ambassadorial journeys. (15) General journeys.

There is another view in the classification of the Arab Journeys. It is more accurate, comprehensive and flexible when applied into practice.

The journey is either subjective or objective. The first pertains to the personal experiences and events that affect his thought and inner feelings. The second concentrates on the registration of things devoid of the self. Under the second category the Arab geographers wrote their contributions in the science of "Routes and Realms". They were interested, in the measurement of distances and roads, the description of countries with respect to their agricultural, economic, political and urban aspects. Thus the "objective" journey in this sense is near to a scientific report.

The writer has the option to write as he likes and in the manner he wants. Hence the journeys in fact is nigh by diaries in which its writer records spontaneously what he witnessed, heard and perceived in a certain period of his life. The journey is a limited period in the lifetime of a human being. It often begins with a date and ends in a date. The journey may last days or months or years. But some of them may deviate from spontaneity to the scientific research method. Under this category lies the journey of Mohammed Hussein Heikal " In the House of Divine Inspiration". This contribution amounts to hundreds of pages despite the small period had spent in Hijaz. The author prepared the materials of his book a long period before his departure to Hijaz. There is another category of journeys written in spontaneity. Among the best books written in this respect is the Journey of the literary man Ibrahim Abd ElKader AlMazny to Hijaz in 1930 A.D. In this journey you can find a lot of the features of his personality, its violence, its release, its sarcasm and rebellion. He writes in a novelistic style and uses the device of the dialogue perfectly to the degree that you find yourself before a magnificent painting or in front of a movie throbbing with life.

New Journeys: their motives and kinds

The relations of the Arabs with the Arabian Peninsula are ancient since the dawn of Islam. Moreover, they extended to the pre-Islamic paganism where groups of the inhabitants of the peninsula migrated to settle down outside their mother land in Syria and Iraq. The Arabs after the Islamic conquest penetrated into the depths of distant places as they were not satisfied to live only on the borders of their semi-desert places. They bear now a new message which rendered them masters while they were previously content with dependence on Persia and the Eastern division of the Roman Empire.

Pilgrimage is the principal factor that attracts many moslem travellers caravans to Hijaz during ancient times: Ibn Jubair, Ibn Battuta, Ibn Al Mujawer, Al Ayashi and others.

If pilgrimage, and perhaps the desire to learn helped keep the

history of the two sacred cities during the past ages, the rest of the Arabian peninsula had lost the motives of the journey. Thus these places remained unknown and unheeded until recent times. For this reason Taïf despite its historical relations with the beginning of the call and the propagation of Islam and its nearness to the holy city of Mécca; its history had been overlooked.

At the beginning of this century, a new trend had taken place. The journeys of the Arabs in this century have pictured three different political eras: The Turkish era that ends with the Arab revolution in 1916 and the Hashemite era from 1916 to the date of King Abdul Aziz's conquest to Hijaz in 1924 and the Saudi era which begins in Hijaz since that date up to now. The first era is represented by two journeys: The journey of Ibrahim Rifaat Pacha entitled "Mirror of The Two Sacred Shrines" that comprises four journeys made by the writer in the years 1901, 1903, 1904, 1908. The second journey was that of Mohammad Labib El Batanouny made by him, to Hijaz in company with Khedive Abbas Helmy at the end of 1909.

The Hashemite era was represented by three journeys: the journey of Imam Mohammad Rashid Reza to Hijaz at the beginning of AlHusseini's revolution on the Turks in 1916, the journey of Amin AlRihany "Arab kings or a Journey in the Arabian Peninsula" in 1922, and the Journey of Kheir ElDin AlZarkaly "What I Saw and Heard".

During the Saudi era there were numerous and various journeys as: Ibrahim Abdul Kader AlMazni's "Journey to Hijaz" in 1930, the journey of prince Shakeeb Arsalan entitled "Nice Feelings in the Mind of the Hadji on his way to The Holiest Shrine" in 1930, the journey of Mohammad Hussein Heikal "In the House of the Revelation" in 1936 and the journey of Ahmad Hussein "My Sightseeing tour in the Arabian Peninsula" in 1948; and the journeys of Bint Alshatae "The Land of Miracles — a Journey in the Arabian Peninsula" in 1951 and her second trip in 1972, and the journey of Dr. Mohammad Badae Sherif "In the House of Revelation in 1963."

Thus we could classify modern Arabian journeys either according to historical eras or according to their objectives and goals. We prefer the objective classification. The modern Arabian journeys could be classified into three categories:

- (1) Pilgrimage and visits Journeys.
- (2) Political Journeys.
- (3) Press Journeys.

We shall talk on each category, its objectives, its historical circumstances and general characteristics.

First

Pilgrimage and visits Journeys

Writers inspire the subject matter of their books from the names of the holy shrines: "The Mirror of the two Holy Places", "The Hijazi Journey" "In the House of Revelation" etc...

The Journey of the pilgrimage and visit was developed in its objectives by Mohammad Hussein Heikal. He chose the required elements required to serve his aim and his personal attitude.

Secondly:

The Political Journeys

The only Arabian journey that was political **from** the beginning to the end is the famous journey of Amin ElRihany "Kings of the Arabs or a Journey in the Arabian Peninsula". He started his journey by visiting Hijaz on the fifth day of February in 1922 corresponding to the eighth day of **Rajab** 1340 A.H. The author asserted in the introduction of his book that his aim is a contribution to **The Arab Cause** and to make the Arab rulers acquainted with each other. Al Rihany was the first to travel through the competing Arabian Emirates. Despite his failure in political objectives, he achieved big success in the writing of his journey and recording that important stage in the contemporary history of the Arabian Peninsula".

Kheir El Din Al Zarkaly Journey "What I Saw and Heard" is a political one though his advent to Hijaz was rather as a political asylum. Zarkaly said that he had escaped from Damascus after the defeat of the Syrians in the battle of Mysalone in 1920 and headed for Egypt via Palestine. Al Zarkaly was interested in history, monuments, the tradition of the bedouins and their literature rather than politics. He was not sure that Al Hussein was capable of changing the status quo in Syria or cancelling what had been agreed upon between Britain and France.

Thirdly

The Press Journeys

We mean by press journeys, the trips made by some Arab journalists and literary men to the Arab Peninsula every now and then to cover the news of some important occasions or just for curiosity. These visits are paid upon an official invitation from the government or on a personal initiative by the writer himself.

The first important occasion in this respect took place in the Saudi era in the year 1344 (A.H.) corresponding to 1926 (A.D.) when the first world Islamic conference was concluded in response to the invitation of the late King Abdul Aziz Al Saud.

Among the contributions done in this respect was a book entitled "Inside Nejd and Hijaz" by Mohammad Shafik Effendi who described it as "a series of political, social, and religious essays including facts, sightseeing tours inside the Arabian Peninsula" and were published in "Assiyassa newspaper."

In 1930 (A.D.) Ibrahim Abdul Kader Al Mazni the famous literary man paid a visit to Hijaz named by him "A Journey to Hijaz" In it he did not mention the causes of the visit, but pointed out to the celebration on the occasion of the pledge of allegiance to Abdul Aziz to be a king of Hijaz. He also spoke on the banquet entertained by "Prince Faysal" the ViceRoy in AlKandara Palace.

Abdul Wahab Azzam visited Saudi Arabia many times. His first journey was in company with Fouad First University to perform the religious duty of pilgrimage in 1356 (A.H.) corres-

ponding to 1367 (A.D.). His second journey was in the year 1367 (A.H.) corresponding to 1948 A.D. He was despatched by the Egyptian Government as a Minister-Plenipotentiary of his country in the Egyptian Legation in Jedda. In his second journey he was able to rove in Hijaz and Nejd.

The journey of Bint Al Shatae "The Land of Miracles – A Journey in the Arabian Peninsula." was made in 1951 as a response to an original aspiration in the writer's mind to visit the sacred lands.

These journeys differ as a matter of fact from the points of view corresponding to the idea and the style of each writer.

Some of these journeys concentrate on spiritual meditations. Other journeys are near to scientific trips when they deal with geographical sites, tribes and their accents.

The press journey has its own information characteristics in discovering the unknown facts, lauding the progress and development of the country.

In this respect Dr. Aisha Abdul Rahman (Bint Al Shatae) expressed her astonishment as to the big progress achieved by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1951 A.D. when the aeroplane replaced the camel in joining the distant parts of the country.

In her second journey in 1972 A.D. Dr. Bint Al Shatae expressed her pleasure and wonder to the big leap achieved by the Saudi woman in the field of science where she left her in 1951 an ignorant, lazy and underdeveloped human being cowering behind walls.

THE HISTORY OF ARABIC THEATRE

by
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Translated and abridged by
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Views do differ on the history of Arabic theatre. Some writers deny that the Arabs ever knew the dramatic art before the 19th century when the French campaign conquered Egypt in 1798 and brought some acting groups. This, in their opinion, represented the first beginning of this art in the Arab world.

On the other hand, counter views affirm that the Arabs, even in pre-Islamic time were acquainted with one sort or another of literary dramatic writings and theatrical performance. First, the Arabs had those seasonal literary contestations of Okaz, Zul-Magaz and Meganna where poets used to recite their poems or tell their tales striving for superiority. Big audience used to attend those literary contestations. The poems recited and the tales told did not lack dramatic ideas and spirit. The poet used to use his powers of expression to be more effective. A contest might arise between him and another poet each striving to captivate the attention of the audience, thus creating a sort of dramatic dialogue.

Pros and Cons

Now we may summarise the arguments for and against the theory that Arabic literature has never known dramatic writing.

In his book "Qushur Walubab" i.e. "The Peel and the Core," Dr. Zaki Naguib Mahmoud, an Egyptian professor of philosophy, maintains that "The Arabs never knew the dramatic or novel writing simply because of their unawareness of the peculiarities that distinguish an individual from another. When a writer is brought up and lives in such a cultural atmosphere that denies the individual identity of persons we can never expect of him to draw upon the minutes that characterise a man or differentiate

between man and man. We can never expect such a writer to imagine people or put them in a tragic conflict." "It is characteristic of the Orient that values of the community, be it a tribe or else, were those of the individual, and that the latter had no right for a separate identity. However, this was not the case with the Greeks who regarded the individual as the centre of creativity."

In support of this Abbas Mahmoud Al-Akkad says in his book "The Arab Impact on European Civilization":

"Acting is an art closely related to social life. As the Arab environment was simple and with no multiplicity of workcrafts or complexity of social classes the art of acting or dramatic writing was unlikely."

Tawfiq Al-Hakim says in the introduction to his play "Oedipus King" that the Arabs never knew the art of playwriting or had any theatre. This was due to the nature of their wandering, unsettled bedouin life, a condition against the existence of any theatre and drama. However, even when they settled down in Baghdad, Damascus and other metropolitan Arab centres, and got into contact with the Greek and Indian cultures they remained stuck to a national and historic pride glorifying their intellectual past. In this way pre-Islamic poetry continued to be their ideal example in rhetoric and self-expression."

Mahmoud Taymour adds to these arguments that when the Arabs started to translate from foreign cultures, especially that of the Greeks, they disregarded that part of Greek literature which could not be assimilated into the Islamic culture, namely Greek mythology, embodying the pagan beliefs of the Greeks on their gods, the Creation, and the universe. To them, the Greeks went too far in interpreting the relationship between man and his Creator in terms of a tragic fate.

In his "The Dawn of Islam" Ahmed Amin relates the absence of dramatic writing in the Arab Islamic thinking to religious factors. In Islam it is irreligious to make pictorial forms of living creatures. The same applies to personification of human qualities, or spirit. Also in Islamic social life women should be kept in

seclusion and are not to show themselves without a veil. This constitutes a negative factor in the play of drama or the foundation of the theatre.

Dr. Mohammad Mandour, in his book "The Theatre" states that Arabic literature has almost entirely been in poetry with very little prose, and that it had two characteristics: rhetoric and sensational description, a natural product of the predominant kind of life. It follows, therefore, that dramatic poetry based upon dialogue of different tones, upon characterization and creation of situations through sequences of events, and not only upon high sounding rhetoric and mere flat sensational delineation, could not have been possible.

In support of the same line of arguments Dr. Sahair Al-Qalamawi raises several points in an article published in the Egyptian "Al-Majalla" (n° 111). They might be summed up as follows:

"The Arabs are by nature inclined to the absolutes, their mind being synthetic not analytic, whereas playwriting requires an analytical mind. In Islamic culture there is no discrimination between people on race, origin, or colour basis except that of their true faith. It is unlikely, then, for a dramatic conflict to exist, not even grow; for multiplicity of gods, for any belief in the tragic fate of man emanating, as in Greek mythology, from man's struggle with gods. A Moslem lives in peace with the One Almighty God. However, his complete submission to Fate does not stand as a barrier between him and his ambition or struggle for a better life, but all without the sense of the tragic.

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Contrary to these views a number of leading Arab and non-Arab Moslem writers confirm the idea that the Arabs were acquainted with dramatic writings and the theatre. Among them are Girgi Zeidan, Taha Hussein, the Pakistani thinker and poet Mohammad Iqbal and Dr. Ahmed Kamal Zaki.

Girgi Zeidan stressed the idea that the Arabs have versified

epics like Homer's *Odyssey* and Al-Ferdawsi's *Shahnama*, but, unfortunately, most of these had disappeared before the time came when poets could record their verses after Islam."

"In Arabic literature we still remember the story-teller who used to sit among his audience who would respond to his tales and exchange dialogue with him. The story teller was, in this case, an actor using all cleverness and talents to impress his audience. He would change his tone, moves and gestures with the development of events. He would play the parts of all the characters of his story. His stage would be the courtyard of a mosque, the entrance of a house or the market-place of a town. The audience would be any number of passerby."

Dr. Taha Hussein in his book "Sidenotes on the Biography of the Prophet" stresses the fact that the Arabs had known the story and the novel early from the days of Caliph Omar Ibn Al-Khattab. Even in pre-Islamic time the Arabs knew these and experienced the long narrative poem as well, which developed throughout Arab history. Many characteristics of narrative poetry can be found in Arabic poetry. That poetry was a mirror which reflected the social life of the Arabs, especially in poets like Gareer, Al-Farazdaq and Al-Akhtal, the same role that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* played for the Greeks.

The Pakistani thinker Mohammad Iqbal said in his book "Religious Revival in Islam": "Europe had been somewhat slow in understanding the Islamic roots of her scientific methods of research. In almost every phase of European flourishing civilization we can trace definite Islamic cultural impressions or Arab intellectual influences. It was these Arab influential factors that paved the way for scientific discoveries, experimental sciences, and the fine arts. During the heyday of Arab civilization libraries were full of all kinds of books on tales, magic and superstitions. In their night chat people used to have story-telling, songs, music, dance and vocal recitals. They used to talk about olden times, about wars that broke and ended, empires that rose and fell and about victories brought about through heroic deeds. In all this we had a mix of fancy and reality"

expressed in prose or verse, and the performance done by all kinds of expression: singing, acting, change of apparel, imitation of sounds and movements; and everything in front of an interested and responsive audience.

Dr. Ahmed Kamal Zaki says, in his book "Legends," "Before Islam the Arabs used to worship idols and graven images. They believed either in their power to safeguard them against fate and bring them rain or as a means to a more powerful forces. Like the ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans, the Arabs had their own fabulous tales about their gods. But, unlike them, very little of these Arab fables remained. An example is the Iraqi epic 'Gilgamesh' which came one and half centuries before Homer's epic. It tells about the heroic and tragic life of its protagonist 'Gilgamesh', a tragic hero famous in world literature, an embodiment of man's search for the mystery of life and the tragedy of human existence.

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Evidences to prove the Arab acquaintance with the dramatic art

We have already referred, at the start of this article, to the first evidence, namely the Arab seasonal literary celebrations of Okaz etc, which, used to extend one month after the pilgrimage.

Girgi Zeidan tells that a man from Baghdad used to go up a hill twice a week outside the city with some people around him. The man was a mystic or a 'Sufi'. A dialogue would start between him and his audience as follows: The 'Sufi': "The prophets, do you know where their dwelling is? Are not they now in the loftiest heaven?" The audience would answer: "For sure, of course".

The Sufi, then, would ask a companion to sit down before him and to identify himself with Abu Bakr, the first Caliph in Islam. Then he would extol his deeds and order him to be sent to the loftiest heaven. The Sufi would do the same with Othman ibn Affan and Ali ibn 'Abi Taleb, the third and fourth caliphs.

In the end the audience would bring him a man to personify Mu'awiya ibn Abu Sufyan, the founder of the Omayyad Caliphate and usurper of authority from the Hashemites. The Sufi would denounce his deeds and order him to be put in the dark in repayment of his deeds. The same he would do with his son Yazeed.

When Girgi Zeidan comments upon the scene he says it contains many dramatic elements: the imitation of persons and deeds, the instructions a director gives to a group of actors, a place for the actors and another for the audience, a story told and a lesson taught after which the spectators disperse satisfied and pleased.

History tells that in the court of the Abbaside caliph Al-Mu'tadhed Billah a story-teller called Ibn Al-Mughazeli used to identify himself with the characters of his tales. In the Caliph's presence he would play the part of an Arab, of a Turkish, or a negro and of people belonging to different races or social classes. He was a complete play ing in himself:

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Dramatic features in Arabic poetry and epics

Dr. Zaki Al-Mahasni maintains, in his book "Heroic Literature and the Arabic epic" that Arabic poetry represents the life record of the Arabs and the source of their pride. It has many dramatic features. These can be found in the "Seven Mu'allaqat", (some of the oldest collection of complete Arabic poems). We can also find epic poetry in the Arabic literature of Spain and in the heroic poetry of Abu Taleb ibn Abdul Gabbar from Morocco whose poem of 508 verses inspired Spanish and French poets of the Middle Ages. In all this poetry we find dialogue, dramatis personae, growing action, and direct and implied meanings.

"Al-maqamat" as dramatic literature

'Al-maqama' is an old form of Arabic literature written in rhythmic prose. Dr. Ali Al-Ra'i wrote in his book "The Arts of Comedy" that since pre-Islamic times 'Al-maqama' has been

considered a direct dramatic performance from beginning to end. It was undertaken by one single actor, its audience being people in a club, the caliph's court, a lecture-room, or places of nightly chat. All 'Maqamat' were first-class dramatic works that could be performed on the stage. They had long dialogues, plots growing to a climax, then a final solution or denouement.

'Al-maqama' did not lack the dramatic conflict, full of human emotions of love and hatred, of happiness and distress, and of content and revolt.

Among the famous "maqamat" are those of Al-Jahez, Al-Hamazani, and Al-Hareeri.

To Dr. Abdul Hamid Yunis those 'maqamat are plays in the sense that a play is a collective art and an expression of society symbolised by the values and facts their characters represent. In this 'Al-maqama' provides a pioneering start for the story and the novel as well as the acting art in Arabic literature.

Among the best of these, as already stated, are those fifty 'maqamat' written by Al-Hareeri during the close years of the fifth and the beginning of the sixth centuries Hijira. The main character is that of Abu Zeid Al-Surugi, a man who had devoted himself to literary studies until life depressed him. His income from the literary profession could not provide for his needs. He deserted his birthplace, Surug, in disguise, wandering in distant lands. He used to change his manners and apparel according to situations. At one time he would be a beggar asking for charity. At another he would be a swindler selling charms and spells, and at other times he would be a preacher exhorting people to do good or a humbug full of trickery and crooked ways, and so on. In every 'maqama' the author presents a different character played by the same hero with difference in style, language, tone and clothes. All of them provide a true expression of the society and age in which the author lived.

To give other two examples of Arabic dramatic writings that can be performed on the stage, we have 'Resalat Al-Tawabe' wa-

Al-Zawabe' or "The Message of Demons" The author is Ibn Shahid Al-Andalouisi, (of old Arabic Spain). He wrote his message in rhythmic prose. It is an imaginary journey to the underworld where the writer meets the famous pre-Islamic Arab poets. In an exquisite dialogue he criticizes those poets and describes the underworld in an interesting way.

In the other example "Resalat Al-Ghufran" by Abu Al-Ala' Al-Ma'rri we have a text characterised mainly by dramatic action and dialogue. In the first part the author sends his hero to paradise where he meets philologists and poetry-relaters, then he moves him to a scene in hell where he could see examples of people whom the author hates most especially hypocrites and pretenders.

Similar to these but more compact in its dramatic plot we have a play by the ironic Arab writer Mohammad Al-Wahrani who came to Egypt from Sicily and Syria during the reign of Sultan Salah al-Din. The work titles "The play of the Day of Judgment. It consists of thirteen scenes. The author imagines himself on the Day of Judgment and the return to life after death or resurrection. The author is brought to life with all living things, taken to the place of great gathering (al-Mahshar) and the long standing in the presence of Allah. He describes how terror-stricken the sinners feel. He meets so many people of olden and present times. Among them are men of letters, poets, philosophers, Kings and Sultans. He also meets some angels, then he goes up the Heights overlooking Paradise. The scenes follow successively. In one he could see the torture of three sinners. In each scene the author converse with different people. The play suddenly ends when the author gets up frightened from his sleep.

An ironic tone prevails throughout the parts of the play. All moral deficiencies he had them embodied in examples of people whom he hates. Then he proceeds to show us how humiliated they are on the Judgment Day.

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I think we are now in a position to state that in Arabic literary heritage we have evidence enough to explode the theory that the Arabs were alien to the dramatic art. All the examples given in this short survey can be performed on the stage. They are rich in dramatic content. They just need the modern techniques of the theatre and highly experienced actors who possess enough knowledge of the historical background of those works. Hence we can bring out our classical drama to the world.

Translated and abridged by

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