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NIGERIAN ARABIC LITERATURE AND THE PROBLEM OF CONTEMPORARY ARTISTIC CREATIVITY: A RENEWED READING

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Abstract

This paper traces the trajectory of contemporary Nigerian Arabic literature and offers a constructive critical perspective on its creative endeavours. Employing inductive and descriptive methods, the study seeks to guide writers towards an optimal approach to artistic creativity that may bring their efforts to fruition. Literature is fundamentally a marriage of *idea* (*fikrah*) and *style* (*uslūb*), both governed by particular artistic principles and standards that determine the literariness of a work and its capacity to delight. The study draws attention to the need for young Nigerian poets to engage in genuine creativity rather than retreating into trivial occasional verse. It further proposes greater cultivation of the arts of literary introduction (*taqdīm*) and the personal essay (*khawāṭir*) in place of the *maqāmāt*, whose revival some young writers advocate, on the grounds that contemporary life calls for a communicative idiom rather than an abandoned classical form.

Keywords: Nigerian Arabic literature; artistic creativity; Arabic poetry in Nigeria; contemporary literary criticism; West African Arabic prose; mustaʿribūn.

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1. Introduction

Arabic literature has succeeded in extending its reach into sub-Saharan Africa to a remarkable degree. The Arabic literary heritage was warmly received through the scholarly works absorbed by the Arabicised scholars (*al-mustaʿribūn*), who founded their own literature on its model in order to articulate their social lives in all their varieties and circumstances. Their literature thus remained a stylistic heir to the Arabic mind in its general conceptions. Among sub-Saharan African societies, Nigeria is perhaps the one most influenced by this mentality and most proud of its inherited cultural pattern.

This paper traces the phenomenon through Nigerian literary forms, casting a revealing light upon their merits and shortcomings, with a view to setting their trajectory on a course that ensures their vitality and longevity. The study adopts inductive and descriptive methods to arrive at significant findings concerning the nature of Arabic literature outside its native soil and the deep engagement of the *mustaʿribūn* with its practice in spite of numerous challenges. The discussion is accordingly organised around the following thematic axes.

2. The Problem of Contemporary Poetic Creativity

Poetry was the first traditional literary art to which the *mustaʿribūn* turned — not for any purely artistic objective in itself, but as a complementary component of their religious culture, a means of recording their social events, and an outlet for their inner experience, modelled on imitation and emulation. They typically depicted their inherited cultural environments as the starting points of their creativity, drawing on intellectual and expressive resources, so that one is occasionally confronted, in some of these works, with echoes of pre-Islamic and early Islamic poetry. In all fairness, these early scholar-litterateurs of the foundational stage of this literature succeeded in expressing their social lives with a sincerity that drew their audiences into genuine engagement with most of their poetic texts in particular, despite lacking the cultural means available to contemporary writers and poets.

Subsequent initiatives followed in the same vein at the hands of later innovators, who succeeded in introducing a new sensibility into artistic creativity. They infused their poetry with a pulse drawn from their social spirit and from sincere, fervent emotions, surpassing their predecessors thanks to the more favourable circumstances and means available to them. The poetry of **Wazīr Junayd** is perhaps the clearest evidence of a measured advance towards emerging artistic features, alongside his development of description (*waṣf*), which came to be infused with subjective emotion and meticulous depiction marked by ample imagination, depth of thought, and far-sightedness. Wazīr Junayd writes, in recollection of Khartoum and in description of the aircraft that conveyed him there:

يا من يصعد أنفاسا بأنفاس شوقا بخرطوم ذات الورد الأس
اصبر قليلا فإنا سوف تحملنا رعّادة في الهوى ملموسة الراس
صعّادة تتبارى في تجوّلها شهب السماء التي ترمي بأقباس
ولا تزال في الجو طائرة نسيم ضوء القرى من ضوء نبراس
حتى تنوخ على الخرطوم في غلسٍ والقوم ما بين سهاد ونعاس
يا حبذا البلد الميمون من بلد خرطوم حازت بها ليلا من الناس
ينسى الغريب بها أوطانه أبدا من حلّها لهوى أوطانه ناسي
ابشر، فإنك في الخرطوم فابتهجن أمَا شممت من الكافور والآس

Translation:

O you who climb, breath upon breath,
In longing for Khartoum — abode of rose and myrtle —
Be patient a while; soon we shall be borne aloft
By a thundering vessel, its summit visible above.
A craft that vies in its passage
With the heavens' meteors hurling their flaming brands;
Still in the air it flies, mingling
The breath of village lights with the glow of beacons,
Until it alights upon Khartoum at dusk,
While folk hover between wakefulness and slumber.
How blessed the auspicious land — Khartoum —
That holds within its night a wealth of people!
There the stranger forgets his home forever;
Whoever settles there grows distant from his native longing.
Take heart and rejoice — you are in Khartoum;
Have you not already caught its scent of camphor and myrtle?

A comparable lyrical depth is observable in the elegy composed by **Shaykh Ādam ʿAbdullāh al-Ilorī** for his daughter Khadījah, in which Time is personified as a skilled archer striking the most precious organs of his body — heart and inner being:

الدهرُ سدّد سهمه ورماني فأصابني في أشرف الأركان
فأصابني في مهجتي وجَناني فسرى انتعاش السمّ في شَرَباني
فتوارد الأصحاب في ترياقهم من ها هنا وهنا بغير توان
لكنّما الترياق لم ينفع معي بل زاد منه السم في الطغيان
فالسهم رزء والهموم سمومه والصبر ترياق على الأحزان
تلك الرزيّة من خديجة ابنتي كانت معي كالروح والريحان
عاشت معي سبعا من السنواتِ في زهراتها كشقائق النعمان
فإذا ببنتي قد توسّدت الثّرى والجسم منها مدّ للديدان

Translation:

Time aimed its arrow and shot at me,
Striking me in the noblest of my parts;
It struck my very heart and inner soul,
And the poison's sting coursed through my drink.
Friends rushed to me with their antidote,
Hastening from every direction without delay.
Yet the antidote availed me nothing;
Rather, the poison only grew in tyranny.
The arrow is calamity, sorrows are its venom,
And patience the antidote against grief.
This affliction came through Khadījah, my daughter,
Who was to me as soul and sweet basil.
She lived with me seven years,
Blossoming as the poppy of the meadow.

And lo, my daughter has taken the earth as her pillow,
Her body laid out to feed the worms.

Yet, in most of its contemporary forms, Nigerian Arabic poetry today demands renewed attention to artistic quality rather than mere preoccupation with quantity and density of output — a tendency that betrays an inability to harness the inherited cultural reservoir into a distinct literary independence. A number of poets exhaust their creative energies on trivial occasional verse, without sufficient artistic preparation or genuine articulation of authentic emotion, and without the considered insight that the chosen subject demands. Our poet **Ḥāmid al-Hijrī** — though counted among those young writers in whom hopes for literary attainment had been invested — gives us pause, in his *dīwānal-Ḥadīqah al-Ghannāʾ*, through a recurrent phenomenon: the repetition of ready-made descriptive formulae for different personalities, an outcome of pursuing occasions without adequate preparation. He conveys the same epithets upon different dedicatees, or repeats a stance two or more times across separate occasions. Consider, for example, his *nūniyyah* in praise of Ustādh Murtaḍā al-Ḥaqīqī:

كم شيّد العلم للخيرات بنيانا وقدّم المجد والبركات فيضانا
بُشراك أرضَ إلورن مهبط العلما مَثابة العلم والآداب مَثوانا

Then in another *qaṣīdah* entitled *Man Sarrahuan Yarā al-Barakāt Māshiyatan*, delivered at the honouring ceremony for Justice Aḥmad Bīghūrī, he repeats the same figure:

الشعر في دهرنا ما زال حيرانا ألفاظه تركت معناه عريانا
بُشراك أرضَ الورن مهبط العلما والأولياء من الأقطاب فتيانا

And here are the first eight lines of that same *qaṣīdah* for fuller view:

الشعر في دهرنا ما زال حيرانا ألفاظه تركت معناه عريانا
تمشي معانيه في الآذان عاريةً ولا تؤثّر في الأسماع شكوانا
أفي القوافي؟ أفي الأذهان مشكلة أم القصور من الألفاظ أحيانا؟
وكيف أُطعم شيئا ليس يأكله إلا الذي بات خمصا كان جوعانا
كفاك شيطانَ شعري ما الذي بك هل تُلقي القصيدة في الشكوى لدنيانا
أمَا رأيتَ سماء كيف أنجمها تراقصت فرحات للذي بانا
أمَا رأيتَ زهور الروض زاهيةً تبلوّرت غبطةً لليوم جذلانا
وما يروقك وجهٌ كنت أقرأ في أعماقه آية الأفراح ألوانا

That said, the present writer acknowledges the genuine poetic gift of a small number of contemporaries — counted on the fingers of one hand. Foremost among them is the major poet **Dr ʿĪsā Albī AbūBakr**, who attends with exceptional care to the refinement and sifting of his verse, observing artistic precision in the manner of the great masters. By this discipline he has remained a poet of the first rank in Nigerian society, unrivalled. Consider his lines on the worth of poetry, lying in the quality of artistic execution after intellectual substance:

ما أحسن الشعر والقرطاس والنجاح كما إذا تحقّق للإنسان ما اعتزما
إنّي أشيمُ تباشير النجاح كما يشيمها كل عالٍ يرتقي القمما
حيُّوا جهود مجيدٍ للقريض رأى بين المجيدين عرش الشعر فاستلما
لا يُنشر الشعر إلا بعد غربلةٍ وشِعره يحتوي الآداب والحكما
لا يُطلب المجد إلا في مواطنه وقد تحيّر أخلاق العُلا شِيَما
يرضى من العيش ما يُرجى الكفاف به وعنده قيمة الإنسان ما عَلِما
ومن أصاب من الرحمن مكرمةً يمشي على الأرض بين الناس محتشما

Translation:

How beautiful are poetry, the page, and success,
When one fulfils what one has resolved upon!
I behold the early signs of success
As does every striver climbing to the heights.
Honour the labour of one who has mastered verse,
Who took poetry's throne from among its masters.
Verse is not published until it has been sifted;
And his poetry holds within it letters and wisdom.
Glory is sought only in its proper dwellings;
And the morals of the noble have grown perplexing.
He is content with what suffices in living,
And, with him, a person's worth lies in what they know.
And whoever receives an honour from the Most Merciful
Walks the earth among people in modesty.

3. The Problem of Artistic Prose

The artistic prose tradition in Nigeria — apart from the sermon (*khuṭbah*) and folk narrative — emerged later than poetry, owing to the strong inclination of the great majority towards the classical *qaṣīdah*. The vertical, monometric form was the principal early arena in which writers practised their craft within Arabic literature. The subsequent appearance of the novel, the play, and translated work within Nigerian Arabic heritage exerted a powerful influence and propelled the field rapidly towards visible literary development. Authors began to engage with emerging issues, drawing inspiration from the social arena around them in both its narrow and its wider dimensions. They thus came to differ in orientation and style, and to vary in their measures of success and failure.

3.1 The Sermon (Khuṭbah)

It is well attested that, of the prose genres, the sermon competed most directly with poetry during the foundational stage of our Arabic literature — for a religious motive, no other. In its earliest phase, the sermon bore visible signs of the rudimentary, often replete with the rhetorical embellishments (*badīʿ*) of antithesis (*ṭibāq*), paronomasia (*jināṣ*) and rhymed prose (*sajʿ*). The intellectual content was not yet ripe enough for original innovation beyond reiteration of what the followers of Shaykh ʿUthmān b. Fūdī had already produced.

The course of the *khuṭbah* shifted at the beginning of the twentieth century, as many literary preachers began to track contemporary events and to set out their issues within the frame of weekly sermons delivered from the pulpits of central mosques. The most assiduous follower of these emerging issues was perhaps al-ʿAllāmah al-Ilūrī, in the central mosque of his complex at Agege, Lagos State, who was distinguished among his contemporaries by an articulate and unscripted (*mursal*) style — without recourse to reading prepared narratives from books or papers, as some preachers do.

It is, however, clear that the bulk of contemporary sermons drift closer to the lecture form than to the sermon proper. In many mosques the preacher devotes himself to reading from sheets, as if dictating notes to students; he further burdens minds with controversial issuesunsuited to the occasion. As a consequence, the role of the sermon has diminished, its vitality cooled, and the desired engagement with the listenership has not been achieved. A

further symptom is that some preachers content themselves with the first sermon alone, turning the second into an extended translation of the first into the local language. Raising the level of this genre requires the organisation of dedicated workshops to train preachers in a manner befitting the eloquent Arabs (*al-ʿarab al-maṣāqiʿ*); the meaning of the sermon is not drawn from the verbal pattern alone, but is sustained by gesture and indication and by the proper modulation of the voice.

3.2 The Modern Short Story and Novel

The modern story and novel constitute another artistic phenomenon that has found wide currency in society, particularly among enlightened intellectuals. Professor Zakariyyāʾ Ḥusayn published a story in *Natāʾis* magazine in 1989 entitled *FīSūq Sabon Gari*, and followed it with a collection of twenty-one folk stories in a booklet called *Qiṣaṣ Khaṭṭ al-Istiwāʾ* (1999).

In 1993, Professor Awwal AbūBakr followed with his autobiographical narrative — the first of its kind in Nigerian Arabic heritage — entitled *Imāmwa-Khaṭībfī Manākh Jāmiʿī*. This new development gave shape to social currents in artistic dress. The efforts of younger writers continued to drive the wheel of the story forward, and Nigerian Arabic narratives have, in the main, become more grounded in lived reality than confined to imaginative weaving alone. Yet the story *Limādhā Yakrahūnanā* is largely overtaken by the essayistic element at the expense of narrative artistry: nearly forty pages take the form of an essay on "why they hate us", and the reader's engagement falters once the element of narrative excitement is lost.

It would appear that **Jamīlʿ Abdullāh al-Kanawī**, in his novel *Idfaʿbi'llatī Hiya Aḥsan*, has done much better in terms of suggestive language commensurate with the novelistic form, marking a point of genuine advance for the Arabic novel in Nigeria — although the dominance of dialogue over narration somewhat reduces the artistic value of the work. From here we may also commend the experiments of Ustādh Ādam YaḥyāʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Filānī and his pupil Ḥāmid Maḥmūd Ibrāhīm al-Hijrī, whose novelistic output is marked by a high degree of artistic accomplishment in both *idea* (*fikrah*) and *style* (*uslūb*). On this basis, the present writer holds that this art form — with the exception of a number of distinguished works — is in need of nurture and direction in respect of artistic technique, since for many young authors the limit of literary effort is to record lived reality verbatim, without observing the artistic considerations that the short story and the novel demand.

3.3 Drama

In the dramatic genre the situation closely mirrors that of the short story. The earliest published Nigerian Arabic plays are *Al-ʿAmīd al-Mubajjal* by Professor Zakariyyāʾ Abū Ḥusayn (1994); *Ustādh Raghma Anfih* by Ustādh MasʿūdʿAbd al-Ghanī Adībāyo al-Awyūwī (2003); and *Wa-qad Ghārat al-Nujūm* by UstādhʿAbd al-Ghanī Adītāyo Albī (2005). Subsequent attempts followed, no less significant in quality and quantity within the dramatic art.

The salient observation is that most of these dramatic works face artistic challenges in their structural and expressive constitution. The cause appears to lie in inadequate familiarity with the artistic skeleton of the dramatic work; for, in the view of modern criticism, drama is not merely a slice of life but a concentrated slice of life endowed with a coherent human meaning and a beautiful artistic form. From this it becomes plain that Nigerian writers have succeeded in one regard and fallen short in another: they have succeeded in capturing social events, vying with one another to depict and render what circulates in society, repeating what they suppose suitable for it; but they have at times overlooked the fact that dramatic art is

governed by aesthetic mechanisms that distinguish it from the staging of sociology, politics, economics, ethics or religion.

In light of this, the present writer recommends close reading of accomplished models of Arabic drama and emulation of them for effective creative output. Equally necessary is attention to artistic structure, particularly in adopting an eloquent communicative idiom with the precision of construction that drama demands, rather than persisting in the classical expression familiar within the world of the *qaṣīdah*. The endeavour by some Nigerian writers to invent a "Nigerian Arabic", neither Eastern nor Western, is not in the interest of educated *mustaʿribūn*, let alone their Arabic heritage; it disfigures the face of the language and exposes its speakers to embarrassment before their Arab brethren. Each language has a nature of its own, which will not yield to the expressive structures of another.

3.4 The Maqāmāt

Despite the ingenuity of those who would revive the *maqāmāt* tradition in Nigeria, the contemporary appetite for it should not be exaggerated. A representative passage in the genre offers, in pastiche of grammatical lecturing, the following:

> Then events befell them like grammatical agents, in clauses devoid of inflection, or like the mechanism of knowledge — concealed from them through the scarcity of knowledge — until they were ten men of one man, asking each other questions, as if it were the Day of Resurrection, with each in oblivion of the other. The first asked: "What do you say of one who said, 'Your blessing is everlasting and your dominion eternal?'" He replied: "There is in it an ellipsis of an imperative verb — its presupposed form being 'make'." The second then arose and said: "Indicate to me the upright ruler." He replied: "No support shall reach the bewildered."

While appreciating the strenuous effort that returns us to the *maqāmāt* — one of our linguistic and literary cornerstones in West Africa, in which al-Hamadhānī, al-Ḥarīrī and al-Yāzijī laboured to fine effect — contemporary literary and linguistic life in Nigerian society has long moved beyond the fascination with elaborate rhymed contrivance and the marshalling of lexical and grammatical riddles. How greatly we now stand in need of a communicative Arabic that is conspicuously absent from many of the *mustaʿribūn*, who have grown saturated with classical texts and abandoned conventions without any literary correction or adjustment.

3.5 Introductions (Taqdīm) and the Article (Maqālah)

To the extent that the writer understands the needs of Nigerian society and its creative requirements, it is preferable to develop the art of literary introduction (*taqdīm*) along the lines advocated by some of our distinguished senior scholars, such as Professor Awwal AbūBakr, Professor ʿAbd al-Bāqī Shuʿayb Agaka, Professor Ḥamza ʿIzz ʿAbd al-Raḥīm, Professor Aḥmad Shaykh ʿAbd al-Salām, and Professor Mashhūd Maḥmūd Muḥammad Jamba. These scholars have infused the genre with both a scholarly and an artistic spirit, rather than mere narrative recital without polish or refinement, on the understanding that *taqdīm* is itself an art that must be founded and developed. Agaka, after a lengthy account of the *dīwān* of his colleague ʿĪsāAlbī, expresses his admiration as follows:

> Forgive me, O builder of qaṣīdah and verse, O heart of meaning and clarity. I have lengthened my praise of your dīwān and lavished description upon your poetry. Your creativity has dazzled me, your presentation has pleased me, and you have drawn me into long speech, opening forth the springs of fingertip-

> eloquence onto the path of your art. There is no wonder in this: you have given voice to predecessors, who duly spoke; you have nurtured a generation of young men, who matured as poets upon your work; and you have stirred ecstasy and exhilaration in others, who have built on your taste their researches, dissertations, articles and curricula. None of this is excessive flattery, nor the speech of a sycophant. It is, rather, a powerful testimony, becoming an enduring word for the coming generation. Its abundant supply and copious spring will reach you whenever it requires drinking, and its libations will be drawn to you. Whoever brings forth his dīwān before the eyes of readers calls them to witness the brilliance of his taste; and it is fitting that he should remain the dwelling-place of their verse, the chronicle of their witness, and their immortal song.

Equally, the article (*maqālah*) may be embraced as a serviceable literary heir for cultivating the taste of the *mustaʿribūn* and meeting the needs of society. Professor Jamba has drawn attention to this form, although it has not greatly captivated the young, who lean strongly towards poetry, the story and the play. Consider his elegy for the man of letters, the poet Dr ʿUthmān Iliyāsa:

> Farewell, beloved of millions! The news of the catastrophe arrived like an unerring arrow that struck hearts with wounds not soon to heal. It is the announcement of the death of the great scholar and accomplished writer, Shaykh ʿUthmān ibn Shuʿayb Abū Bakr Iliyāsa. With his passing, a star fell from among the stars of knowledge and learning; a beacon among the beacons of language and literature was extinguished; indeed, a pillar of the call to Islam was brought low, and another bright page in the annals of Sufism in Nigeria was turned. You have departed, O Shaykh ʿUthmān, to the realm of martyrs, before passing your forty-fifth year. In your death are lessons and admonitions for us — chief among them, that life is moments and seconds, as the poet says: “The beating of a person’s heart says to him, / Life is but moments and seconds.” The measure is not the length of life, but the achievements one realises within it and the legacies one leaves behind. Some live long in the world while their works do not amount to a husk; others die young, while their works strain the backs of caravans. To us, O ʿUthmān, you have left scholarly, religious and ethical legacies that are no small matter.

4. Conclusion and Findings

It emerges from the foregoing discussion that Nigerian Arabic literature is a parallel literature to its source — Arabic literature proper — which constitutes its artistic wellspring. The problem, however, lies in the very quality of artistic execution among the majority of contemporary Nigerian *mustaʿribūn*. The writer has accordingly delineated the principal challenges in light of a critical reading of selected models, and has followed each with appropriate solutions according to his own perspective. The findings of the study may be summarised as follows:

1. Nigerian Arabic literature has kept pace with social currents of various kinds.
2. Contemporary Nigerian mustaʿribūn produce poetry in excess on trivial occasions of little literary merit.
3. The scholarly faculty often outweighs the artistic in the creativity of some writers, owing to the weight of their inherited literary memorisation.

4. The sermon increasingly inclines towards the lecture and towards discussion of controversial issues.
5. Narrative and dialogic artistry remain underdeveloped in many short stories and plays.
6. The essayistic and dialogic elements dominate some short stories at the expense of narrative form.
7. In some prose forms, the idea (fikrah) receives greater attention than the style (uslūb).

Accordingly, the writer holds it necessary that aspiring authors read and adopt high literary models in order to develop their creative faculty and acquire the optimal method of structured artistic construction. Equally important is the activation of cultural programmes capable of forming an effective literary generation, whose taste is trained on the artistry of poetry and prose, with due attention to the artistic considerations that govern literary work. Writers should habituate themselves to the use of a communicative idiom in narrative and dramatic creativity, in keeping with the needs of contemporary society — bearing in mind that the style of the *maqāmāt* is no longer adequate to the lived cultural reality of the present.

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