

Al-Jahiz's Method of Writing: An Analysis of *Risalah fi al-Sharib wa al-Mashrub*¹

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Abstract

One of the most important figures for Arabic prose writing in the history of Arabic literature is al-Jahiz (d.255/868 or 869). His works touched many aspects of daily life of the society particularly during the first phase of the Abbasid period. *Risalah fi al-Sharib wa al-Mashrub* (Essay on the Drink and Drinkers)² is one of his important work, in which he shed some light on the issue of drinking *nabīdh*, which was widely taken during that period by people from all walks of life especially after their meal. As a result, there was a severe controversy among the scholars and the jurists as to whether or not *nabīdh* belonged to the category of *khamr* (wine) and whether the consuming of this kind of drink is allowed or forbidden. However, al-Jahiz, as most prolific figures, had his personal view concerning this sensitive issue. The purpose of this essay is to show the method of thinking of this great Muslim prose writer who lived during the Abbasid period which is known as the richest intellectual and literary age of the Arabs.

Keywords: Al-Jahiz; Arabic Literature; Abbasid Literature;

1. Introduction

1.1 Al-Jahiz³ and Mu'tazilah⁴

Al-Jahiz was an *adīb*, a man of letters, who can be considered as one of the first Muslim prose writers who expressed a great interest in Islamic thought. He is one of the finest and most famous writers in the history of Arabic prose writing. In addition, he was also a *Mu'tazilī* and founder of a school of *kalam* (theology), known as *al-Jahiziyah* (al-Shahrastani, 1956, p. 75), which has not survived. Ibn al-Murtada (1979, p. 162) mentioned that al-Jahiz was among Mu'tazilite figures in the seventh generation which were led by Thumamah b. al-Ashras, and then Abu Musa al-Murdar, Ahmad b. Abī Du'ad, Yusuf 'Abdullah al-Sahham and others. In modern times, Watt (1973, p. 218) has mapped out the Mu'tazilite discipleship by dividing them into two schools, Basra and Baghdad, and al-Jahiz was among the Mu'tazilites figures in Basra's school, which started with Dirar b. 'Amr and afterwards al-Nazzam and then ended with al-Jahiz.

Over forty of al-Jahiz's writings – of varying length – survive to the present day (Bakalla, 1984, p.114) from an estimated total of upwards of one hundred and twenty, or another estimate puts the figure at three hundred and sixty (Tannus, 1981, p. 325) and the three principal ones are *Kitab al-Hayawan*, *Kitab al-Bayan wa al-Tabyīn*, *Kitab al-Bukhala'*. The focus here is on one of his work entitled *Risalah fi al-Sharib wa al-Mashrub* (Essay on the Drink and

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² It was translated for the first time into English by Colville, J. (2002, p. 134-143). However, Pellat, C. (1969, p. 52-53). earlier translated some portion of the *risalah* into French in 1967 and this portion was translated from French into English by D.M. Hawke in 1969.

³ He was born in Basra, Iraq, the date of birth cannot be determined precisely. The year is given variously from 159 A. H., 160 A.H. and 168 A.H. Al-Jahiz died in Basra, his birthplace in the month of Muharram 255 A.H. or the last month of 868 A.D. or the first of 868 A.D. It is reported that the cause of the death happened when he was crushed to death under a pile of books in his private library (Yaqut al-Hamawi, Undated, p. 74-106; Ibn Nubatah, 1964, p. 248-260; The Encyclopaedia of Islam, 1965, p. 385-387; Sandubi, 1931, p. 15).

⁴ The Mu'tazilah as an intellectual and theological movement was founded in the town of Basra in Iraq during the first half of the 2nd/8th century lead by Wasil b. 'Ata' (d. 131/748). Classically, the Muctazilite are known for the five principles: God's unity (Tawhīd), God's justice (cAdl), the promise and the threat (al-Wa'ad wa al-Wa'icīd), the intermediate position of the grave sinner (al-Manzilah bayn al-Manzilatayn) and commanding the right and forbidding the wrong (al-Amr bī al-Macruf wa al-Nahy can al-Munkar). As well as these five principles, the Muctazilah also believed in the doctrine of the creation of the Qur'an and free will (The Encyclopedia of Islam, 1965, p. 783-793; Brandon, 1970, p. 462; Glasse, 1890, p. 291-292).

Drinkers).⁵ In addition, I have made use of other works of al-Jahiz particularly his *Risalah fi al-Nabīdh wa Sifat Ashabih*, since it contains references to the subject under discussion.

2. Background of *Risalah fi al-Sharib wa al-Mashrub*

The content and significance of the *risalah* concerns the issue of special drinks, which the people of the Abbasid society took after their meal. It is reported that the Abbasid society generally had their special drinks taken after meals. These drinks were known simply as *nabīdh*⁶, and sometimes known with the addition of the principal ingredient's name such as *al-Nabīdh al-ʿInabī*, *al-Nabīdh al-Zabībī*, *al-Nabīdh al-Tamarī*, *al-Nabīdh al-ʿAsalī* etc. According to Ahsan, these types of *nabīdh* were widely taken during this period by people from all walks of life (Ahsan, 1979, p. 111). As a result of this situation, there was a fierce controversy among the scholars and the jurists as to whether or not *nabīdh* belonged to the category of wine. In addition, there was also a wide discussion among the *fuqaha'* whether the consuming of this kind of drink was allowed or forbidden. For example, Imam Abu Hanīfah (d. 150 A.H.) interpreted the prohibited wine as meaning only that made from grape juice and regarded *nabīdh* (made by boiling dates or raisins) as permissible, provided the quantity drunk was not enough to cause intoxication, in which he was probably following Abdullah b. Mas'ud al-Hudhalī, leader of the Iraqi school of law (Harb, 1990, p. 222). The same idea was brought forward by the Mu'tazilī al-Jubbaṭī (d. 315 A.H.) who argued that God has created things which resemble those things which were allowed in Paradise but forbidden on earth. Among them is *nabīdh*, which is allowed for the believers so that they can guess what *khamr* will be like in the hereafter (The Encyclopedia of Islam, 1965, p. 840).

However, it is known that the Qur'an clearly forbids Muslims from drinking *khamr* (wine) and this is stated in several verses. Because Islam found that wine drinking was deeply rooted in the habits of people in *Jahiliyah*, then Islam proceeded towards its prohibition only by gradual steps. In Surah al-Baqarah, for example, the Qur'an (2:219) says: "They ask thee concerning wine and gambling. Say: "In them is great sin, and some profit, for men, but the sin is greater than the profit". The Qur'an again in Surah al-Ma'idah (5:91) says: "Satan's plan is (but) to excite enmity and hatred between you, with intoxicants and gambling, and hinder you from remembrance of Allah and from prayer". In another verse, the Qur'an (5:90) asks Muslims to avoid wine, gambling, divination and sortilege by saying: "O ye who believe, intoxicants and gambling, dedication of stones, and divination by arrows, are an abomination of Satan's work. Eschew such abomination, that ye may prosper".

The subject of *khamr* (wine) and *nabīdh* is found in all periods of Arabic literature, particularly in poetry (Harb, 1990, p. 219-234). However, prose works devoted to wine and *nabīdh* are also found, but far less frequently. Interestingly, we found that *Risalah fi al-Sharib wa al-Mashrub* and *Risalah fi al-Nabīdh wa Sifat Ashabih* written by al-Jahiz were among the earliest prose works in this subject matter. Afterwards, in the fourth-fifth century, Abu Ishaq Ibrahīm b. al-Qasim (d. 383 A.H.) wrote *Qutb al-Surur fi Awsaf al-Khumur* (Haji Khalifah, 1947, p. 7). This work, as was described by Harb (1990, p. 219) is an encyclopaedic work discussing the etiquette of wine and wine parties, wine's remedial qualities, how to profit from its blends, textual citations dealing with it, legal argument centred upon it, entertaining stories about it, and an appendix of poetical references.

Being a man of letters (*Adīb*) and a religious scholar, al-Jahiz, the author of the *risalah*, intended to explain the differences between *nabīdh* and *khamr* and gave more information about these types of drink to his reader. Through this work, al-Jahiz presumably replied to a correspondent who was warm-hearted of wine and had asked him for an account of the various fermented drinks. Speaking about the content of this work, Colville (2002, p. 134) said that the author employed the methods and terminology of Islamic debate in this *risalah*, to argue in favour of that most un-Islamic of vices – alcoholic drinks. Pellat (1969, p. 16) on the other hand, admitted that al-Jahiz has designed it to show that the drinking of *nabīdh* is lawful. Moreover, it can be said here that the *risalah* was among al-Jahiz's contribution to the study of Islamic jurisprudence from the Mu'tazilī point of view, which differed from other schools of Islamic juristic thought.

⁵ *Risalah* (pl. *Rasa'il*) is Arabic term used in classical Arabic literature to describe the literary letter/epistle which addressed to a name (or without naming) person as a literary device. At the start, this device was mainly used for works of moral and political advice, but soon came to be employed also for scientific, and philosophical, etc. which we would be call treatises, essays or epistles. This kind of writing has not always denoted a short work; a *risalah* can extend over several volume (The Encyclopedia of Islam, 1965, p. 532-544; Beeston, 1977, p. 3).

⁶ *Nabīdh* is a comprehensive designation for intoxicating drinks, several kinds of which were produce in early Arabia, made from barley, honey, spelt, dates and etc (The Encyclopaedia of Islam, 1965, p. 840). Supposedly *nabīdh* here means date wine (Pellat, 1969, p. 52).

3. The Addressee and the Time of Composition

Consequently, there is also another work written by al-Jahiz, which related to the subject of *nabīdh* entitled *Madh al-Nabīdh wa Sifat Ashabih*. This work was addressed to al-Hasan b. Wahn⁷ and in which al-Jahiz asked him for some *nabīdh*. We found that al-Jahiz developed his idea about the effects of *nabīdh* and its advantages in this work. For example, he said that when *nabīdh* soaks into your bones, spreads to every organ and suffuses into your brain, it clarifies your mind, redeems your spirit from care, relaxes you in body and soul, makes you carefree, and etc. After that he praised al-Hasan b. Wahn and described the quality of his *nabīdh* (al-Jahiz, 1991, p. 113-128).

Scholars of al-Jahiz agree that the title of the work which we are going to discuss here is *Risalah al-Sharib wa al-Mashrub*, however, we find al-Jahiz in his work entitled *Risalah fi Fasl ma Bayn al-Adawah wa al-Hasad* called this work *Risalah fi Tahlil al-Nabīdh*. He claimed that when the work was presented to the Caliph al-Ma'mun, then Muhammad b. Abu al-Abbas al-Tusī attacked it and protested against al-Jahiz's arguments. Abu Milhim in his introduction to *Risalah fi Fasl ma Bayn al-Adawah wa al-Hasad* also assumed that *Fi Tahlil al-Nabīdh* was the *Risalah fi al-Sharib wa al-Mashrub* itself. Despite al-Jahiz not mentioning specifically his addressee with this latter work, presumably the addressee of this *risalah* was also al-Hasan b. Wahn, because both of the *risalah* are on the discussion of *nabīdh*.

However, it is difficult to give a precise date of composition of the *risalah*, because the author, as usual, never mentioned the date of composition of his works. What can be suggested here is to put it somewhere in the period of al-Hasan b. Wahn when he served as *al-Katib* for Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Malik al-Zayyat between 218 A.H. and 233 A.H.

4. The Text of the *Risalah*

It seems to us that the original structure of the *risalah* is, of course, partly lost as the work has been preserved only in fragments, but thanks to Hassan (2000, p. 201-216), who collected almost all of the *rasa'il* of al-Jahiz. However, in its scholarship edition, the *risalah* consists of twenty pages (Arabic text) which can be divided into two main parts and is separated into eight fragments (al-Jahiz, 1991, p. 261-281; Colville, 2002, p. 134-143). The first fragment is entitled "*Fasl min Sadr Kitabih fi al-Sharib wa al-Mashrub*" and is followed by fragments two, three and four with the headings "*Fasl minhu*". Fragment five is entitled "*Fasl minhu fi Tahlil al-Nabīdh Duna al-Khamr*". The sixth, seventh and eighth fragments again come with the heading "*Fasl minhu*". Part one of the *risalah* begins with al-Jahiz's introduction in which he mentioned his correspondent's request. In this part, he wrote: "You asked me to write on the virtues and vices of drink and of drinkers and to describe the condition of drunkenness. You asked me to make clear the difference between *nabīdh* (toddy) and *Khamr* (wine) and explain why the former is such a popular drink" (al-Jahiz, 1991, p. 261). Part two begins with al-Jahiz's response to the issue that has been highlighted by his correspondent, he wrote: "I understand everything you have said about the varieties of *nabīdh* and the difference between good and bad quality. I can see just how interested you are in the subject" (al-Jahiz, 1991, p. 261).

5. The Outline of the *Risalah*

As has been mentioned before, the text of *Risalah fi al-Sharib wa al-Mashrub* is very short, however, one can observe that the author of the *risalah* had developed more information concerning the topic. The following outline of the content of the *risalah* should give us a clear idea of its design:

- Part One:
 - a. The subject matter of the *risalah*.
 - b. The advantages of *nabīdh*.
 - c. The disadvantages of *nabīdh*.
 - d. The type of *nabīdh*.
- Part Two:
 - a. Al-Jahiz's response to the issues.
 - b. The differences between *khamr* and *nabīdh* in the light of legitimacy.
 - c. The Prophet's Muhammad companions made a distinction between the *Fara'id* and drinking alcoholic

⁷ His full name is al-Hasan b. Wahn b. Sacid b. cAmr b. Hasin b. Qays b. Qinan al-Harithi. He was known as Abu 'Ali. He was among the famous katib for Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Malik al-Zayyat. He also was one of a famous poem in the Abbasid period and contemporary to the two of great Abbasid poem, Abu Tammam (d. 231/232 A.H.) and al-Buhturi (d. 284 A.H.). His brother, Sulayman was a vizier to the Caliph al-Mu'tazz and al-Muhtadi. He died around the year 250 A.H. (al-Kutubi, Undated, p. 136).

- beverage.
- d. Many more things are permissible than are forbidden.
 - e. *Ahl al-Madīnah* (The resident of the Prophet's city) forbids *nabīdh*.
 - f. Some people from the Prophet's city drink *nabīdh*.
 - g. The main purpose of the *risalah*.
 - h. Conclusion.

6. The Content of the *Risalah*

In his introduction, al-Jahiz praises his correspondent without naming the person. He then goes on to explain the subject matter of this work by saying: "You asked me also to make clear the difference between *nabīdh* and *khamr*, and explain why the former is such a popular drink. I was to list all the points in its favour and detail the defects of bottled varieties ...etc". He then goes further to explain the advantages of *nabīdh* on behalf of his correspondent. For example he said: "It settles the stomach, eases the temper, and removes traces of pallor and puts colour back into the cheeks. It transforms sickness into health. It puts energy into the weary and gives companionship to the lonely. It clears the mind, invigorates the body and puts backbone and heart in a man. It dispels inhibition and shame. It sharpens the appetite and reduces the consumption of water and etc.

Afterwards, al-Jahiz makes a list of the disadvantages of *nabīdh* such as "it loosens the tongue and adds to the level of nonsense around. It causes bad temper and incontinence, headaches and insomnia and leaves a hangover that spoils the whole day. It prevents a man rising for prayer. It demeans the soul and degrades the sense. It damages the character and stimulates bile. It gives malice free rein in the heart. It dries up sperm and creates paranoia. It causes jaundice, consumption and eye disease. It destroys a man physically and ruins him financially....etc".

Al-Jahiz also made a list of the types of *nabīdh* and mentioned the quality of each type as described by his correspondent. Among the varieties of *nabīdh* which al-Jahiz recorded in the *risalah* are: *al-Sakar*, *al-Masjur*, *Nabīdh al-zabīb*, *Asīr al-karm*, *Nabīdh Asal Misr*, *Razin al-Ahwaz*, *al-Dushab al-Bustanī*, *Nabīdh al-Jazar* and *Nabīdh al-Kishmish*. When he finished listing the types of *nabīdh*, al-Jahiz went on to answer the questions from his correspondent. He said that he understood everything that his correspondent said about the varieties of *nabīdh* and the difference between good and bad quality. He then went on to differentiate between *al-khamr* and *al-nabīdh* in the light of its legitimacy. He said: "It sometimes happens that things classed as legally forbidden undergoes a sort of metamorphosis whereby the effect upon it of a new colour, smell, taste, etc. alters it in such way that a semantic shift occurs and, what had been forbidden is transformed into something legitimate!"

From al-Jahiz's point of view, there is no doubt about the legitimacy of *nabīdh*. He then gave his personal evidence against those people who disagreed with him on that matter. He wrote: "The scholars who disagree with my position on the legitimacy of *nabīdh* are contradicted by their own admission....because this view (legitimacy of *nabīdh*) is corroborated by the fact that at no time, past or present, has God ever forbidden man anything without allowing him something else with the same, or similar effect. He (Allah) thus provides men with a lawful substitute for everything He denies them". He then said that although people of the Prophet's city (*Madīnah al-Munawwarah*) forbade *nabīdh*, that was not a reason for it to be forbidden because the status of a particular community cannot be the basis for prescribing or proscribing anything. According to Al-Jahiz, what is lawful and unlawful can be determined only by three elements: firstly, the revealed Qur'an, secondly, established prophetic precedent and finally, the valid reasoning of sound minds. It is clear here that al-Jahiz refused to accept evidence from *Ahl al-Hadīth*, (the Hadīth scholars) but he prefers to use his mind to come to the conclusion on the matter.

At one stage, al-Jahiz gave a list of men from the Prophet's city who drank *nabīdh* namely; Ma'bad b. Wahb, 'Abd al-Malik Gharīd, 'Ubaydullah b. Surayj, 'Abd al-Rahman b. 'Amr, Ibn Muslim b. Muhriz and others. Al-Jahiz (2000, p. 213-214) in his editorial remark said that these people were contemporary musicians and singers. In addition, al-Jahiz also claimed that some of the Prophet's immediate successors (without naming them) and their own forefather who lived in the Prophet's city were drinkers of *nabīdh*. Because of this reason, al-Jahiz attacked the Hadīth scholars by calling them as unprecedented in the chronicle of human fabrication and deceit.

It is interesting to note here that al-Jahiz also mentioned other juristic rules in this *risalah*. For instance, firstly, he said that God has forbidden the consumption of blood that has been spilled but not of congealed blood in the liver, the spleen, etc. Secondly, al-Jahiz said that God has forbidden the flesh of carrion but not the flesh of animals slaughtered in accordance with the law, or of fish and locusts. Thirdly, al-Jahiz said that usury is unlawful but ordinary financial transactions are perfectly legitimate. Fourthly, short selling is unlawful but forward buying is permissible. Finally, he said that fornication is forbidden, but sex within marriage is most definitely not and pig meat is unlawful to eat but suckling

goat, lamb and veal are not. After all he writes "in fact, many more things are permissible than are forbidden". Near the end of this *risalah*, al-Jahiz again mentioned his main aim from this work. He said:

My reason for listing the above mentioned drinks and discussing their varieties and origins was a fear that this text might fall into the hands of someone who may not have heard of them all and would suppose that the references to some of these abominable, new fangled brands are the ravings of a man stung by a scorpion. My purpose in noting them at the beginning was to advise upon which ones are lawful and which ones are not and to show how the Muslim community has failed to reach unanimity on this issue and why ambiguity and error have arisen.

Al-Jahiz concludes the *risalah* by saying: "Let that be sufficient for now. If this *risalah* went on any longer, you would find it too much to take in. Brevity can be more effective than thoroughness if it runs the risk of being boring. I have livened seriousness with humour and spiced reasoning with jest to lighten the reader's labour and spur the listener's interest".

7. The Style of Writing

Our examination of al-Jahiz's argumentation in the *Risalah* reveals his Mu'tazilite conviction. He wrote in a distinctive way arguing with thoroughness and orderliness and it surprises in its ability to maintain reader interest. In order to achieve these aims, the author, as usual, had quoted Qur'anic verse as supporting elements into his idea. However, it is found that there is only one verse of the Qur'an that has been quoted in the *risalah* i.e. from Surah al-Ma'idah (5:90) when Allah said:

Meaning: O ye who believe! Make not unlawful the good thing which God has made lawful for you, but commit no excess; for God loveth not those given to excess.

Al-Jahiz quoted this verse to support his argument concerning the legitimacy of *nabīdh*. We found that al-Jahiz had already explained his reason for the legitimacy of this type of drink, and finally, he concludes with this quotation of the Qur'anic verse by saying: "I have sought not only to argue the case for the lawful but also to shed light on the illicit and give full recognition to each. In this way, I shall have affirmed the legitimate, acknowledged the unlawful and adhered to the injunction of God's saying".

In addition, we found that al-Jahiz does not express a personal opinion on the subject he deals with, but tends to discuss the contradictory views of various people and parties. We can see these elements in many fragments of this *risalah*, the author used these words which refer to other opinions such as "*Qulta*" (You said), "*Sa'alta*" (You asked), "*Wama Taqul*" (What you have said), "*Fa'in Qala lana al-Qa'il*" (If somebody told us), and "*Qala al-Ba'd*" (Another said), etc. Through this style, al-Jahiz was able to rid himself from a great responsibility of what he has said in his works. However, al-Jahiz had his justification for this method that he intended to leave the judgments to the readers. Interestingly, there is no quotation from sayings and doings of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH, as there might be. However, we can consider that the *risalah* is strongly Islamic in flavour. There is more than enough here, in brief, to show that al-Jahiz's method of thinking is obviously in this *risalah*.

8. Conclusion

This article has discussed how al-Jahiz developed this controversial idea concerning *nabīdh*. Indeed, it is not an easy task to put forward an idea that will please all parties. Al-Jahiz accordingly chose opinions, methods and arguments thoughtfully. However, this does not mean that his idea is therefore either invalid or insignificant. We can resolve this riddle, however, by realizing that al-Jahiz was, above all, a master of style. Finally, we are aware that he played a significant role in the Abbasid period in assisting Muslims to cope with their social problems and face up to some of the challenges.

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