

The aesthetics of rhetorical purposes in "*The Lizard Letter*" by the Elegant Man of Letters, Muhammad al-Bashir al-Ibrahimi

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Abstract---This scholarly paper aims to address and study the linguistic heritage left by the leading masters and scholars of Algeria through a contemporary reading. In it, we focus on and seek to benefit from the impact produced in the recipient's mind by the rhetorical issues embedded in the masterpieces of classical compilations and writings. This can only be achieved by shedding light on one of its arts and forms: "*the epistles*", which disclosed their efforts and clarified their interest and engagement with this kind of rhetorical study namely, the "letter/epistle." *Al-Jāhīz* held the foremost place in classifying and producing it, for it is a noble discipline that enjoyed sanctity and veneration due to its connection with the Noble Qur'an and what it indicates of the enchantment of craftsmanship and the secret of eloquence. Accordingly, we will attempt to uncover the production of a heritage literary text that carried weight in establishing and employing the features of rhetorical study, represented in the epistle "the lizard" by the shaykh, man of letters and refined stylist *Muḥammad al-Bashir al-Ibrahīmī*, who in doing so followed the path of the ancients in the strength of their expression, their foundational formulations, and in what his pen and thought radiated. For every mind has its own attentiveness and its own method in approaching questions and presenting them thus highlighting the most important rhetorical discussions the epistle addressed and the benefits, rarities, and purposes it contains, by which the tongue is preserved in its identity-related and geographical dimension. Accordingly, we ask: What is the rhetorical scholarly value that the epistle "The lizard" added to rhetorical study? How was its

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material arranged? And what did it offer to Algerian literary heritage and to literary study more generally?

Keywords---rhetorical purposes, *The Lizard Letter*, al-Bashir al-Ibrahimi, Algerian linguistic heritage, aesthetics of discourse, rhetorical studies.

1) The Epistolary Art in Abbasid Literature: A Brief Context

Artistic epistles, in their various types, witnessed a clear renaissance. This prose genre underwent broad development in both content and style, reflected in the diversity of its orientations and themes. There is no doubt that this is attributable to the development of Abbasid society, which helped this art to emerge. Evidence for all this is the large number of writers who contributed to multiple topics literary, social, and political during this luminous period of Islamic civilization. Abbasid epistles attained a great status, becoming among the most important arts of Abbasid prose and a meaningful image of social, political, and literary life.

The purposes of literary epistles in the Abbasid era multiplied and evolved until the epistle became capable of containing many subjects that classical Arabic poetry had long expressed. One result of this development was that prose came to encompass more than poetry; and the epistolary art in particular began to knock on the doors of “pure” literature and to express its most important themes. This indicates the multiplicity of ways to express such themes. Epistolary writers also devised new styles that took the epistle out of the traditional mold that had continued to cast its shadow over fraternal epistles and chancery epistles alike, whether in form or content something we find in the epistle we are studying and treating here. In this specialized study, I adopted an integrative methodology, drawing on inductive, analytical, and descriptive approaches.

2) Conceptual Explanation of the Title and Its Knowledge Foundations

2.1 What is meant by the term (epistle/letter)?

The contexts in which the word epistle appears in Arabic heritage are diverse. We find a large book titled “Epistles”, yet it contains different kinds of texts. The term epistle also appears in titles and in the places where texts are found whether the text is sent to a specific reader or directed to the public at large. The use of the word epistle raises several problems related to the meaning of the usage and the reality of the relation between the label and the type of text to which it is applied in terms of structure and content. These problems may not confront us when studying other prose genres such as the sermon, the prosimetric tale (maqāmah), or the boastful contest; because the uses of the term in those genres are limited, and earlier critics were able to determine their technical meanings.¹

As for the term epistle, it did not receive a dedicated study that investigates its various uses and examines the meanings of related expressions such as “book/letter” and “epistolary communication”, and so on. I will attempt in a first stage to study the meaning of epistle in language and across the various contexts of its usage, and to study its relation to nearby words; and in a second stage to analyze the link between the general lexical meaning and the literary technical usage.²

2.2 The lexical meaning of epistle:

The root (r-s-l) in Arabic contains three closely related semantic domains: extension/length/expanse (first), softness/ease/freedom from constraint (second), and deliberation/gentleness/patience (third). The verb (to write an epistle) conveys all of these meanings: directing something from one place to

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another, releasing from constraint, and expanding/extending. Likewise, correspond can mean “to proceed slowly/deliberately,” appearing in contexts of carrying out an action. The word epistle originally signified “sending speech from one place to another,” and this meaning remained attached across contexts. Although the term report (*malkah*) was used to name oral or written speech carried by a messenger, the dominant usage became the word epistle.³

The term epistle was applied to all models without distinction. Chancery writing solidified the dual meaning of epistle: as a genre of literary writing and as a genre of administrative correspondence. The first generation played a decisive role in shaping the term and drawing the boundaries of its use: most written literary prose was placed under correspond, and the term epistle was applied to various artistic models representing a new direction in Arabic prose regardless of the writing situation or external context.

Ancient critics, in critical contexts related to epistles, used words close in meaning to the technical sense of epistle most importantly “correspondence”, which is synonymous with the chancery epistle. *Al-Qalqashandī* says: “In earlier times this bureau was called the Bureau of Epistles, and sometimes the Bureau of Correspondence.” The term “exchange of letters” is also used. *Al-Qalqashandī* himself placed the chapter on fraternal correspondence under the title: “On the conventions of fraternal correspondence.” Several terms were used to label epistolary replies: (responses), (back-and-forth exchanges), and (official marginal responses/signatures).⁴

Responses is a multi-meaning term: it can refer to eloquent improvised speech by rhetoricians and orators in boasting contests and delegations before kings and caliphs, as a reply to questions testing their wit; it was also used for reply-letters. Reviews describes a kind of correspondence repeatedly exchanged between writers, and it can apply to prose and poetic exchanges alike. Thus, response and review represent, in the epistolary technical sense, two modes of utterance or two writing situations tied to the shift of the correspondent from reader to writer.⁵

Finally, the signature is a special term for a reply written by the caliph, judge, or governor at the bottom of a petition containing a case raised to him. It is brief no more than one or two sentences and may include a line of poetry or a verse appropriate to the situation. Ancient and modern scholars distinguished these texts from prose and poetry. Thus, discussions of writing arts focused on epistolary more than other prose genres. We also observe that the ancients established a system of terms denoting sub-genres within a single context, while the term epistle remained relatively free from classification constraints, exceeding the boundaries of a single literary genre.

3) The Term (Epistolary Communication)

Ancient interest in epistolary as a critical topic appears by the third century AH. *Ibn al-Nadīm* and *Yaqūt al-Ḥamawī* mention a number of works in this field, but they have not reached us. From their titles, it seems that literary epistles were material for selection and compilation. If we consider surviving works, we do not find a definition of epistolary with a specifically critical character: it was not defined in third-century works, especially those devoted to the art (such as *al-Risalah al-‘Adbrā’* by *Ibn al-Mudabbir* and *al-Kitāb wa-Ṣifāt al-Dawāb wa-l-Qalam* by *Abū al-Qasim ‘Abd Allāh al-Baghdādī*). Indeed, the term itself does not appear in these works; it first emerged in books of criticism in the fourth century AH.

A definition of epistolary appeared within classifications of prose genres. Most critics divided prose into four major categories. *Ibn Wabb* says: “As for prose, it is either oratory, epistolary writing,

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argumentation, or narrative.” He compared these categories using the criterion of circumstances of speech. Thus, epistolary became synonymous with the situation of writing an epistle: “As for letters, one is at ease in weaving them, for the writer is spared the situation we mentioned.” *Ibn Wabb* defined epistolary as: “Speech by which one corresponds with someone far away; hence it was called epistolary, and epistle comes from that.” Thus, epistolary is a communicative situation between two parties distant in place, and a discursive act devised to overcome an obstacle that prevents face-to-face encounter or to deliberately avoid it even when proximity exists, as we will see in literary epistolary. From ancient rules of epistolary, we infer that the term does not refer only to writing epistles; it can also mean utterance between distant parties whether written or conveyed orally through a messenger. This meaning appears in *Ibn Wabb*’s chapter on the conditions of the messenger within the section on epistolary rhetorical conditions enabling him to stand in for the sender in addressing the recipient: “What requires the sender to use a messenger is that he choose him such that he is better than those present in intellect, refinement, precision, and readiness of mind; because he has appointed him to take his place in what he conveys. If he sends someone whose honesty and intellect he trusts, he entrusts him to say on his behalf what he deems closest to correctness.”⁶

4) The Writer’s Encyclopedic Culture

All of this depends on the writer’s breadth and culture:

Broad culture produces literature of broad scope, in which appear sound intellect, delicate taste, sharp insight, correct judgment, an inventive mind, and precise depiction. For if the man of letters or artist did not possess broad culture, he would not be able to craft enduring artistic passages. Yet if culture takes hold of the writer and monopolizes his mind absorbing his senses he follows facts alone: gathering, analyzing, testing, and explaining them. His literature then becomes of serious value in the world of thought; but it may lose graciousness, charm, tenderness, and pleasantness, and joy may cease to flow from it.

In discussing the writer’s culture, we turn to a book that elaborated on it and defined its features: *al-Mathal al-Sā’ir* by *Ibn al-Athīr*. I relied on it in this chapter because its author is among the writers concerned with this study and because it is one of the most important Arabic sources on the craft of writing. My choice of *Ibn al-Athīr* is not exclusivist; rather it is theoretical he excelled in treating this art and served as a spokesman for other writers and poets of his era.

Before entering *Ibn al-Athīr*’s view of the writer’s culture, I ask: Did ancient Arabic criticism recognize this culture? Did it grasp its concept?

Yes: it recognized the acquired foundations within the limits of its circumstances, concepts, and the sciences of its ages almost no less than in modern criticism. It perceived the great, foundational effect of culture (and what relates to it) in literary production, poetry and prose. Perhaps ‘*Abd al-Ḥamid al-Kātib* was among the earliest to recognize this craft and to call for it in a way that aided writers in their tasks this appears in his epistle to scribes in which he said: “As for what follows: may God preserve you, people of the craft of writing, protect you, grant you success, and guide you; and make you, the community of scribes, in the noblest positions people of refinement, manliness, knowledge, and narration. Compete, O community of scribes, in the branches of learning; understand religion; begin with the knowledge of God’s Book and the obligations; then Arabic, for it is the training of your tongues; then improve handwriting, for it is the adornment of your writings; and memorize poetry, know its rare vocabulary and meanings, and the days of the Arabs and non-Arabs, their reports and biographies, for that helps you toward what your aspirations seek. Do not neglect arithmetic, for it is the foundation of the fiscal registers. Keep yourselves away from greed great or small and from trivial and base matters, for they humiliate necks and corrupt scribes. Purify your craft from vile traits; keep yourselves above tale-bearing and slander and what the ignorant practice. Beware arrogance, affectation,

and self-exaltation, for they invite enmity without prior grievance. Love one another for God's sake; be gentle in your craft; counsel one another in what befits people of virtue, justice, and nobility among your predecessors." Then *Ibn al-Mudabbir* in the Abbasid era absorbed more components of this framework in his advice to novice scribes: he urged mastery of what they need from Arabic sciences and cultural paths and emphasized the necessity of looking into the knowledge of the age and its foreign currents.

5) A General Reading of The Lizard Letter:

This epistle is eleven pages long in total.

Its rhetorical purposes and aims are many: it combines boasting, dialogue, comparison, contestation, "escape/exit", and other rhetorical colors, forms, and arts. Whoever contemplates the Epistle of *al-Ghamām* finds it truly a letter of precious scholarly value and clear benefit. The shaykh dictated it from memory during his imprisonment in the city of Aflū in the Oran Sahara. It contains poems, proverbs, linguistic problems, scholarly witticisms, and great subtle points that cannot be dismissed evidence of the author's genius, mastery, and linguistic faculty. It resembles the works of the ancients in what their pens produced.

He mentioned that he dictated it from memory, and that were it not for time and place this epistle would have rivaled the epistles of the ancients in comprehensiveness and gathering of aspects. But his excuse before you and whoever reads it and finds in it deficiency, or the placing of some names out of place is that he dictated it in one night; and it was dictated only by a weary mind from a confused memory that transmitted much of what it retained and lost much of what it stored, amid a disturbed state and a preoccupied mind. Perhaps this epistle will be a reminder of the condition in which it was written, the town from which it came, and the time in which it was composed.⁷

5.1 The content of the epistle

We can study the epistle before us within the framework of fraternal epistles prevalent in this era, which received great attention. The epistolary art developed from other prose arts known since the pre-Islamic period, such as contests of lineage, imprecations, boasting contests, debate, and the like.

5.2 Style and structure

As for its structure, it begins with the basmalah. From surveying a number of epistolary texts, it is observed that epistle writers took three stances regarding it: one view held that it must be adhered to as a Prophetic practice, expressed by *Ibn Durustawayh* when he mentioned that the custom ran to open letters with the basmalah. The second view held that it should be omitted and that one should enter the topic without clinging to the formal method established by the ancients; *al-Sūli* says: "Scribes used to commit to it at the beginning of letters, then they abandoned that." The third view adopts a middle position, alternating between adherence and omission. It appears that *al-Bashir al-Ibrāhīmī* followed the method of the ancients in beginning with the basmalah, as we observe in his epistle.⁸

Al-Ibrāhīmī's adherence to it seems intended to add a kind of commitment to what the ancients established, along with mention of some Prophetic sayings, Arab speech and proverbs, and other materials we will treat in part of this paper.

His epistle is devoid of a title, as is the case with most literary epistles especially lengthy ones. This phenomenon may be attributed to the development of the concept of the literary epistle due to the multiplicity of ideas, opinions, and theories, and the evolving necessities of life along with his conviction that mentioning a title in his epistle is of no benefit.⁹

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As for the praise, the writer praises God for the blessings granted, which cannot be counted. Praising God brings blessing and is important to complete its preface.

It is reported from the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) that he said: “Every matter of importance that does not begin with praising God is (cut off, incomplete).”¹⁰ Writers commonly placed the praise after the greeting and before, because the value of these formulae began to recede in literary epistles, as they were among the structural elements that epistles once strictly observed.

Writers also cared about their epistolary conclusions as they did their introductions, understanding the importance of the relationship between introduction and conclusion and achieving organic coherence since the conclusion is a successful means to arrive at the end of the topic, as becomes clear from the epistle’s ending.

The epistle’s topic is novel and engaging. The author true to his habit creates new subjects in his literary epistles, often based on contemplation, as we mentioned. This approach became common among a number of writers of that era, coinciding with the spread of theology and its presence in gatherings. These writers were keen to go far in establishing an idea that ensures interaction with the reader and distances itself from traditional epistolary forms. The “speech environment” clearly influenced the growth of this type of epistles a type built on preferring one of two things that overlap and diverge in relations. From the title, we perceive the result of this preference from the beginning, and the symbolism of the lizard among the Arabs.

5.3 This epistle as a “fraternal epistle”

It belongs to epistles exchanged among companions. Some call them personal or self-revealing epistles in contrast to chancery or official ones, for two reasons: first, because the two parties in communication (sender and recipient) extend beyond the narrow circle of “brothers/companions”; and second, because their distinguishing feature is personal self-disclosure between correspondents as they exchange news about themselves, their affairs and private lives, express personal opinions and stances, declare subjective ideas and perceptions regarding surrounding issues, or reveal feelings and emotions especially on social occasions or historical moments.¹¹

This meaning appears in later composition manuals. In *al-Qalqashandi*, the “companions” include congratulations, condolences, gentle banter, gift exchanges, intercession, favors, invitations, requests to visit, renewing affection, opening correspondence, marriage proposals, seeking satisfaction, pleading, apology, complaint, requesting needs, gratitude, reproach, visiting the sick, inquiring after the ill, censure, reporting news, and joking. It includes not only prose dialogues but also poetic exchanges.¹²

Therefore, the purpose in fraternal epistles exceeds mere reporting and achieves functions of literary composition; through it, correspondence becomes a literary movement and a field of competition in writing. This competition develops the dialogic feature in epistles: writers begin from basic communicative acts, then expand them through the exchange between them, where each side first letter or reply pushes toward completing writing in the same purpose. It is known that such personal epistles, if they have literary, intellectual, or historical value, fall today under what is called “the literature of personal correspondence,” especially those written by men of letters, writers, prominent figures, or ordinary people with a high linguistic or literary sensibility. The greater the space of self-disclosure in such correspondence, the more the self is affirmed, emotions intensify, secrets and hidden matters are

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revealed, truths appear, and it almost becomes a form of confessions or testimonies with artistic and historical value.¹³

6) What Is Meant by “The Aesthetics of Rhetorical Purposes” in the Epistle?

By the aesthetics of rhetorical purposes in the epistle is meant: the meanings that overflow from the speaker’s soul meanings that require a composition that binds their parts and gathers their scattered aims. This is achieved only by drawing on forms of Arab speech that contain wisdom, benefits, rarities, and purposes so that the text attains a coherent textual creation in its foundation. When presented to the listener’s ear, it becomes more capable of providing delight and of rational and emotional persuasion, thereby affecting souls, inspiring them, and urging them to hold fast to the authenticity of this heritage.

7) The Artistic Study of the Epistle

7.1 Beginning, exposition, and conclusion

The opening signal appears in the basmalah and the mention of Professor *Aḥmad b. Abi Zayd Quṣaybah*, who is intended by this fraternal epistle.¹⁴

7.2 Verbal borrowing from the Qur’an

“(So He created the date-stone)” and “ink and extension.”¹⁵

7.3 Incorporation of ḥadīth

“It was presented on the table of the Messenger of God (peace and blessings be upon him) so he raised his hand. It was said to him: Is it forbidden, O Messenger of God? ...”¹⁶

7.4 Poetry

His citation of “Stop, let us weep...”¹⁷

“May God water a land where the lizard knows it to be far from ailments, good in herbage.”¹⁸

“It digs into hard ground for fear of collapse and makes its house the top of the neck.”¹⁹

“My heart has become cold and barren it desires not to return Except to—sturdy grasses and—cool forage.”²⁰

“Ruins of a hungry desert, their bellies empty lizard-burrows are for them food without price.”²¹

“I ate lizards and did not find them loathsome though I truly love the meat of sheep.

A person is but what is said of him after so be a good tale for the one who understands.”²²

“A young lizard with two leaps was a virtue over every barefoot and every shod in the land.”²³

“And if the dogs of Banū al-Marāghah crouched I strode behind: Dāram and Jumārī.”²⁴

“O daughter of the ember, of Dhī Yazan in pure lineage—hostile—and in spacious nobility.”²⁵

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7.5 Arabic proverbs

His saying: “More knotty than a lizard’s tail,” “This is a ruined lizard-hole,” “Qā’ibah escaped from *qūb*,” “Do not eat fish and drink milk,” “More bewildered than a lizard,” “More undutiful than a lizard.”²⁶

7.6 Supplicatory and parenthetical sentences

His saying: “And Ya‘qūb exerted himself greatly in establishing witnesses meaning evidences—...”
Al-Zamakhsari said: “The Bedouins are not like al-Kashshāf more enamored of bribery than judges.”
 So the lizard said: “If you tasted *al-kušā* with livers, you would not let the lizard run in the valley...”²⁷

8) The Artistic Image in the Epistle

The reader finds in the epistolary texts of Imam *Muhammad al-Bashir al-Ibrāhīmī* a phenomenon no less important than those studied under the label of scene-features: namely, *imagery*. It is studied within the expressive artistic feature, and it appears across the Imam’s works as an artistic path in its own right. The importance of artistic image in a literary work lies in how it captures the listener’s attention toward the meaning embedded within it and makes the listener respond to it; because it grants literature life by reviving the power of meanings through the architecture of expression predication, fronting and postponement, and the like.

There is another imagery feature in this epistle: care for a person dear to the writer friendship remains present, and the writer’s care for it. In an epistle of this small size, he depicted the importance of friendship and placing people in their proper ranks, describing the friend as that brilliant philosopher. Thus, the epistle conveyed its intended aim: showing the shaykh’s genius in its letters and words and the strength of its meanings and purposes.

The writer’s capacity and greatness appeared in persuasive depiction: as he faced the “lizard” as a scene and a source of inspiration that he drew in his mind, he summoned his scholarly, cognitive, and linguistic resources in building wording and meanings. In this way he fulfilled the required purpose in the most complete manner.

9) Conclusion

Writing literary epistles is among the finest and most beautiful kinds of literature, containing an incomparable pleasure due to the obvious linguistic and cognitive generation that only the masters of language can perform. Yet this literary color has come to the brink of disappearance due to the scarcity of practitioners amid rapid modern development and social media, which has pushed it toward oblivion. People of language and literature in our contemporary era no longer revive it; rather, we kiss and contemplate the epistles of the past for the splendor of their expression and the beauty of their language in meaning and structure, and for the pride in a history we once built in a former age. This is what drove us to delve into this type of linguistic heritage, hoping to light even a small spark through which we may glimpse the legacy of fathers and grandfathers among the masters of language, foremost among them the refined man of letters *Muhammad al-Bashir al-Ibrāhīmī*: a pen that gathered the enchantment and mastery of the ancients, lest we ourselves close the doors of thinking and independent reasoning and be accused of ingratitude and rebellion against what our predecessors left us.

We reached through this study that:

- The Imam shaykh left behind a great heritage of authored works across different fields of knowledge, as his scholarly writings testify.

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- The shaykh was keen to display his linguistic mastery; he appeared as an owner of his language, acquainted with its secrets, drawing from its lexicons what matched his topics. In addition, he varied his styles and sentences to suit meanings; you see sentences interlaced powerfully in the braid of meaning.
- The epistle “*al-Ḍabb*” by *Muḥammad al-Bashīr al-Ibrāhīmī* though a small part of his production shows that he deserves the place he occupied in Algeria’s history as one of the most prominent literary writers produced by the Algerian capital.

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Footnotes

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2. *Adab al-Rasā’il fī al-‘Aṣr al-Ayyūbī (al-Qaḍī al-Faḍīl as a Model)*, p. 35. See also: Maḥmūd Shukrī al-Ālūsī and Fr. Anastas Mārī al-Karmālī, *Adab al-Rasā’il bayna al-Ālūsī wa-l-Karmālī* (The Literature of Epistles between al-Ālūsī and al-Karmālī), ed. Kūrķīs ‘Awwād and Mikhā’il ‘Awwād, 1st ed., Dār al-Rā’id al-‘Arabī, Beirut, Lebanon, 1407 AH/1987, p. 65 ff.
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11. *Adab al-Rasā’il fī al-‘Aṣr al-Ayyūbī (al-Qaḍī al-Faḍīl as a Model)*, p. 41.
12. Ibid., p. 41.
13. *Adab al-Rasā’il fī al-‘Aṣr al-Ayyūbī (al-Qaḍī al-Faḍīl as a Model)*, pp. 42–43.

14. *Āthār al-Imām Muḥammad al-Bashīr al-Ibrāhīmī*, p. 41.
15. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 41.
16. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 41.
17. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 43.
18. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 45.
19. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 45.
20. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 47.
21. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 48.
22. *Āthār al-Imām Muḥammad al-Bashīr al-Ibrāhīmī*, vol. 2, p. 49.
23. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 49.
24. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 51.
25. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 51.
26. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 43. See also: Yūsuf b. Nāfilah, “al-Ṣinā‘ah al-Mu‘jamiyyah fī (Risālat al-Ḍabb) li-l-Shaykh Muḥammad al-Bashīr al-Ibrāhīmī al-Jazā’irī (d. 1385 AH/1965 CE),” *Majallat Amārāt fī al-Lughah wa-l-Adab wa-l-Naqd* (Amārāt Journal of Language, Literature, and Criticism), vol. 4, no. 1 (March 2020), p. 91.
27. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 47.