

## A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF AR-RUSAFI'S POETIC WRITINGS

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**ABSTRACT:** *The great poets of Arabic vis-a vis their poetic works are usually grouped into two categories. The first group are poly-theme poets while mono-theme poets form the second group. The typical example of the first group is the poet under study (Ar-Rusafi). He was a specialized poet who composed extensively on socio-political and educational poems. As a lover of education, having failed in the final examination, he inquisitively and privately studied till success came on his way. He was the first poet to fully represent the Iraqi's national feeling and political aspiration. This paper aims at presenting some poetical instances of ar-Rusafi. It begins with biographical accounts which comprises of his early life, education and his career. Effort is made to examine his literary activities which were rendered in poetic form. The poetic lines of this poet are critically examined vis a-vis the content in this paper. This is followed by having a look at the appraisal of his works. Afterwards, the paper ends with a conclusion and some recommendations are made. It is true that the west recognized Shawqi long before it did Rusafi, but the reason for this is that European orientalisists came in contact with Egypt long before they did with the rest of the Arabic-speaking world.*

**KEYWORDS:** Critical Appraisal, Ar-Rusafi, Poetic Writings

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### INTRODUCTION

Ar-Rusafi's position in Iraq is somewhat like that of Ahmad Shawqi in Egypt. He was the first poet to fully represent the Iraqi's national feeling and political aspiration. Having failed in the annual examination of the fourth year class, Rusafi left the institution and studied for some time in a private school till he enlisted himself as a pupil of the then celebrated savant Mahmud al-Shukri al-Alusi under whom he studied Arabic literature and Islamic sciences for about twelve years. After his graduation, as a lover of teaching, he delivered a series of lectures on Arabic literature in the *Madrasah al-Wa'izun* which were afterwards published under the title of *'Nafhut al-Tib fil Khitabat wal-Khatib* in 1915. Rusafi realised that no nation could ever progress in the world until it had an ideal before it; and that no nation could ever achieve all-round greatness unless education was made common and its women folk were free to march shoulder to shoulder with their men folk.

### Biography of al-Rusafi

His full name was Ma'ruf ar-Rusafi born in 1292/1875 to a respectable Kurdite tribe of Jabbarah which traced its descent to 'Ali b. Abi Talib, the fourth orthodox Caliph, and which originally lived at Karkuk in modern Kurdistan. At the later half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, his father migrated to Baghdad in search of livelihood, and settled down at Rusafah where our poet was born and brought up (Jamiu, 2008:81-82).

## His Education

Having picked up his three R's in one of the primary schools of Baghdad, Ma'ruf joined al-Rashidiyah al-'Askariyah for higher education where he studied for four years. But, as ill-luck would have it, he failed in the annual examination of the fourth year class. Unable to bear his failure, he left the institution and studied for some time in a private school till he enlisted himself as a pupil of the then celebrated savant Mahmud al-Shukri al-Alusi under whom he studied Arabic literature and Islamic sciences for about twelve years (Chejne, 1998:4).

## His Career

As he was not quite well off, he had to serve as a teacher to continue his further studies. While still sitting at the feet of his beloved master, al-Alusi, he got the professorship of Mandli, Baghdad, after a competitive examination held by the local government, standing first among the eleven successful candidates of his group. When he was at the point of joining the appointment, the Director of Public Instruction, Baghdad offered him the post of a teacher of Arabic literature in the local *I'dadiyah al-Rasamiyah* Institution on an equal salary. Al-Rusafi, however, accepted the latter which he continued to hold with conspicuous success till the establishment of the 'Uthmanly Democratic Regime.

As time rolled by, ar-Rusafi's fame as a scholar spread far and wide. His services were required by the proprietor of the famous Turkish Journal "*Iqdam*" to edit its Arabic version. Accordingly, ar-Rusafi left for Constantinople to join his new office but when he was still on his way to the Turkish capital, he learnt that the directors had abandoned the idea of bringing out the Arabic version. Ar-Rusafi then returned to Baghdad disappointed after visiting Salunika and other places of historical interest.

As he was hard pressed for money on his way back home, he had to sell some of his poetical manuscripts at Beirut to meet the expenses of the journey. Muhammad Jamal, the proprietor of *al-Maktabatul-Ahliyah*, purchased the manuscript and published it under the title of "*Diwan ar-Rusafi*" after getting it edited by late Muhiyuddin al-Khayyat. The work was well received by the public and was favourably reviewed by several distinguished Arabic periodicals and magazines of Syria and Egypt. The scholars like 'Abdul Qadir al-Maghribi and Father L. Cheikho al-Yasu'i too praised the poetical talents of Ma'ruf ar-Rusafi.

After a month, ar-Rusafi was appointed as Arabic tutor in the *Madrasah al-Mulkiyah al-'Aliyah*, and editor of the Arabic journal, "*Sabilur-Rashad*" of Constantinople. He went to the Turkish capital for the second time to join his new appointment the duties of which he discharged with credit for about a year. During his stay there, he delivered a series of lectures on Arabic literature in the *Madrasah al-Wa'izun* which were afterwards published under the title of *Nafhut al-Tib fil Khitabat wal-Khatib* in 1915.

Here Ma'ruf got married but unfortunately all his children died shortly after they were born. He learnt the Turkish language of which he had a smattering in his childhood. He, according to Chejne (1998:5), remained at Stambul till the end of the World War I.

After the peace was concluded, Rusafi went back to Syria but he could not secure a suitable job there. He was, however, appointed a teacher of Arabic in the Teachers' Training College at Jerusalem where he had an easy time.

In recognition of his services to Arabic literature and journalism, the members of *al-Kulliyatul-Inkliziyah* of Palestine organised a public reception in his honour which was attended by all the distinguished scholars. The leading Arabic journals reported it as a great event.

In 1921, when the provisional government of 'Iraq was set up, the Ministry of Education appointed him Vice-President of the *Lajnatut-Tarjamat wat-Ta'rib* (The Committee on Translation and Transliteration) and was afterwards appointed Minister of Education. He was also elected a member of the Turkish Parliament before the World War I and Parliament of 'Iraq (Jamiu, 2008:82).

### His Literary Activities

Besides being an educationist, a journalist, and a politician, Rusafi was an author of the following works of the prose and poetry:

- i. *Diwan* ar-Rusafi (vol. 1): This contains all the poems which he composed till 1910 when it was first published by *al-Maktabatul-Ahliyah*, Beirut. It consists of four parts, namely: (i) *Kawniyat* (cosmological poems), (ii) *Ijtima'iyat* (social poems), (iii) *Tarikhiyat* (historical poems), (iv) *Wasfiyat* (descriptive poems).
- ii. *Diwan* ar-Rusafi (vol. II): Still in manuscript form. It contains all those poems he composed after the publication of the first volume till his death.

Besides the above *diwan*, the poet had another collection of *qasa'id* and fragments of poems which he did not publish as they contained scathing criticism of some persons and also of the state.

- iii. *Riwayat al-Ru'ya* : An Arabic translation of a novel by a famous Turkish poet, Namiq Kamal. This was his first prose work that was published in 1909 at Baghdad.
- iv. *Dafa'al-Hujnah fi 'Irtidakh al-Luknah* : In this brochure, the poet collected all the Arabic words found in the Turkish language. It was published in Istanbul in 1331/1912.
- v. *Nafhut al-Tib fil-Khitabat wal-Khatib* : A collection of his speeches delivered under the auspices of the *Madrrasah al-Wa'izun*, Istanbul, dealing with the Arab art of speaking.
- vi. *Al-Anashid al-Madrasiyah* : It contains his songs, patriotic as well as literary, which the school boys of Syria and 'Iraq recited on various occasions. It was collected by Khalil Tutah, Principal, *Darul-Mu'allimin*, Quds in 1920.
- vii. *Muhadrat al-Adab al-'Arabi* ( in two parts) : It contains his speeches delivered in 1921 and 1922 to the teachers of the various schools of 'Iraq.
- viii. *Kitab al-'Alat wal-'Adat* : A very useful scientific treatise on names of various articles and instruments with an introduction on *Ta'rib* and *Ishtiqaq* (Arabicisation and derivation) of the same.
- ix. *Daf'ul-Miraq fi Lughatil-'Ammati min ahli al-'Iraq* : A manuscript dealing with the dialect of 'Iraq, its grammar, characteristics, proverbs and phrases.

Besides the above stated works, he collected material for writing a voluminous work on “The Muslims of today” which, unfortunately due to his death, he could not complete.

### **A Critique of His poetic writings**

Having mentioned his literary works, we shall give a brief critique of his poetic lines. In some lines, certain inciting words are used by the poet in his attempt to encourage young generation of his country. Though, he believes that such words are needed to address the issue in claiming one’s right. The question is how realistic is that belief in view our understanding of government position on such critic. His expressions are too confrontational. This method is capable of inciting the citizen against the constituted authority. It may eventually lead to the incarceration of the poet. It is believed that a poet serves as an oracle to be consulted by people when embarking on any adventure. Our poet should be diplomatic in demanding for certain rights. In addition, he claims that he came from where Tigris River is situated. This kind of expression is known in Arabic as *Fakhr* which means ‘self-boasting’. The claim in this line is, therefore, tenable as it has been justified by the poet. His description of natural phenomena at times brings his readers in dilemma of understanding his intention.

### **Appraisal of his literary works**

Having given the Arabic and English versions of some of his poetic lines, I shall now consider his poetical achievements. Even in his early age Rusafi gave promises of a great national poet. He memorised the verses of the classical Arab poets and later on he himself began to write poetry. When Rusafi recited his *qasa'id* in the literary circles of Baghdad, the public was much impressed by his style, raciness of their diction and the wealth of imagery. Though Turkish despotism prevented Rusafi from giving a free play to his poetic talent in ‘Iraq, being a Turkish dependency, he soon earned a name for himself in the Arabic-speaking world by having his poems published in the various Egyptian periodicals and journals (Jamiu, 2008:82-83). The subject of his poetical compositions was at once the awakening of the degenerate Arabs from their long slumber and also a fierce criticism of the vagaries of the despotism of the ‘Uthmanly Turks of Constantinople symbolised by the autocratic reign of the late Sultan ‘Abdul Hamid Khan.

Thanks to the ceaseless efforts and endless sacrifices of the patriotic leaders of the stamp of Jamaluddin al-Afghani and his co-workers, the despotic government of the ‘Uthmanly Turks was soon replaced by democracy under the leadership of the nationalist Turks so that our poet was then free to breathe the atmosphere of liberty, to use his poetical genius for the regeneration of his oppressed countrymen and to bring them out of the slough of despondency in which they had fallen all these years.

Rusafi realised that no nation could ever progress in the world until it had an ideal before it; and that no nation could ever achieve all-round greatness unless education was made common and its women folk were free to march shoulder to shoulder with their men folk. The following verses illustrate the poet’s sentiments as stated below:

تقدم ، أيها العربي شوطاً      فإن أمامك العيش الرغيداً

“Advance (in the race of life), O Arabs! And verily there lies before you a happy life.”

أتباع أفئدة النساء كأنها      بعض المتاع وهن فى عهد الصبا  
شرف المليجة أن تكون أدبية      وجمالها فى الناس أن تنهبها

“Are the hearts of (your) women to be sold away while they are still in their tender age as though they are goods and chattels?”

“The nobility of a beautiful woman consists in her being literate, and her beauty in the eyes of the people consists in her being cultured and polished.”

ابنوا المدارس نستفضى بها الاملا      حتى نطاول فى بنيانها زحلا

“Build up colleges and schools till we surpass the Saturn itself so that we may realise our ambition.”

As a patriotic poet of intense national fervour and zeal, Rusafi, unlike many ‘Abbasid poets, made frequent references to the Tigris in Baghdad, and drew his imagery from her landscape so much so that he was often called ‘*Ibn Dijlah*’ as will appear from the following verse:

أنا ابن دجلة معروف بها أدبى      وإن يك الماء منها ليس يروينى

“I am the son of the Tigris through which my literature is known, even though its water does not quench my thirst.”

Rusafi’s poems have been classified into (i) tragic, (ii) social, and (iii) narrative and in all these he has had considerable influence on the contemporary Arab poets. His success as a writer of tragedies can be accounted for by his sensitive temperament and by his insight into human nature – characteristics that are so essential to be a successful tragedian.

His value as a social poet cannot be too highly exaggerated. As a social reformer, he studied the social problems from close quarters with a critical eye and prescribed panacea for all social evils that were eating into the very vitals of society. In his poems, Rusafi had revolutionized the outlook of his Arab countrymen. As soon as his *Diwan* saw the light of the day, the Arab journalists welcomed him as the inventor of a new type of poetry, hitherto unknown in Arabic literature as they commented on him thus:

إن ابن الرصافة مبتكر طريقة النظم الإجتماعى وفارس الميدان فيه

“Verily the son of Rusafah has struck a new note of writing ‘socialistic poem,’ and has become a hero in this field of Arabic poetry”( Jamiu,2008:84).

The most important characteristic of his poetry that marks him as an outstanding poet was his wonderful narrative power. A perusal of his poems such as *Ummul-Yatim* (The Mother of the Orphan), *al-Yatim fil 'Id* (The Orphan on the occasion of 'Id festival) and *al-Mutalaq* (The Divorced Woman) will bear testimony to it. The following extracts from his poems will illustrate Rusafi's unrivalled power of describing natural phenomena:

نزلت تجر إلى الغروب ذيولا صفراء تشبه عاشقا متبولاً

She (the sun) is setting in the west pulling her skirts and looks

pale like an emaciated lover.

تهتز بين يد المغيب كأنها صب تلملم في الفراش عليلاً

She shakes before disappearing as if she were a lover tossing

his bed like a love-sick person.

ضحكت مشارقها بوجهك بكرة وبكت مغاربها الدماء اصيلاً

At the sight of your face the place of her rising (the east where

the sun merges) smiles in the morning, and the where she sheds

tears of blood in the evening.

وعدت بأقصى الأفق مثل عرارة عطشت فابتت صفرة وذبولاً

In the distant horizon she appears like a wild narcissus which

is parched and consequently presents a withered and yellow

appearance.

قد غادرت كبد السماء منيرة تدنو قليلاً للاً فول قليلاً

She has left the middle of the sky bright moving little by little

towards setting.

### Style of the Poems

Given the size expected of an article, a verse by verse or detailed analysis of Rusafi's literary ingenuity in composing this poem is unnecessary. As a result, only salient aspects of the style shall be examined.

A major feature of Rusafi's style in his poems is the avoidance of obscure words and complex constructions. He wrote for common people, so he aimed at a style with a harmonious blending of sweet words in simple and lucid syntax. His flair for simplicity of style and sweetness of diction was remarkable.

Having his poem recited at schools, Rusafi carved a niche for himself in the circle of modern poets. With this in mind, he avoided using vulgar expressions, colloquial diction, strange and unfamiliar words (*gharaib*), since these elements often obscure the principal ideas and real



meaning. Apart from its literary worth, his poetry had great social and religious values. It sheds light on aspects of the life, friends and encouragement.

### Opening strategy

The classical Arabic poetry usually started with an amatory preamble called *Nasib* which laments the traces of the camp of the beloved, describes the horse and yearning for women whom they did not see. Abu Nuwas and other critics like Ibn Rashiq started to query, according to Moreh (1979:165), the rationale behind the continuation in the use of this preamble especially during the Abbasid era when things had changed so much and there were no more ruins to cry over. Though, it is maintained that the purpose of the preamble, as Bonebakker (1985:49) opines, is to serve as a means of drawing the attention of the audience before the poet embarks on the main theme of his poem.

The author of this poem began with the word *Taqadam* which means 'advance' which is an encouraging word which our poet employed to stir Arabs into action. This usage could be attributed to his patriotisms.

### Tashbih (Comparison/Simile)

*Tashbih* can be defined as one of the three components of *Balaghah* (Rhetoric): *Bayan* (lucidity), *Ma'ani* (precision in the use of words), *Badi'* (linguistic embellishment) or stylistic elegance. *Tashbih* is a verbal noun from the Arabic verb '*shabaha*' (to compare) and it has four major parts, according to Abu Bakre (1989:8-9), namely: (i.) *Mushabbah* (object being compared), (ii.) *Mushabbahu* (object to which comparison is being made), (iii.) *Wajhu sh-Shabah* (objective of comparison), (iv.) *Adatu Tashbih* (linguistic instrument used in achieving comparison). For instance, he says:

غربت فابقت كالشواظ عقيها      شفقا بحا شية السماء طويلا

She has disappeared leaving behind her in the margin of the  
heaven a long evening twilight like a smokeless flame.

شفق يروع القلب شاحب لونه      كالسيف ضمخ بالدماء مسلولا

Twilight, whose pale colour frightens the heart, is like a sword  
drawn and besmeared with blood.

Here, our poet compares evening twilight with a smokeless flame and pale colour is like a sword.

### Badi' (linguistic embellishment)

*Badi'* simply means linguistic embellishment or stylistic elegance. It is the third component of *Balaghah* (Rhetoric). Rusafi's extensive use of figurative speech may be said to be a result of his familiarity with the Qur'an which is a store house of the *badi'*. The following are some beautiful figurative expressions in the poem: *Isti'arah* (Metaphor)

نزلت تجر إلى الغروب ذيولا      صفراء تشبه عاشقا متبولاً

She (the sun) is setting in the west pulling her skirts and looks

pale like an emaciated lover.

Here, the poet described a natural phenomenon which its setting in the west tearing her skirts and looks pale like an emaciated lover while it was very beautiful and charming before the time. As everything looks fascinating and attractive at the beginning but it suddenly turns ugly.

### **Husn al-Taqsim (beautiful apportionment)**

Comparing two elements with two agreeable others. He says:

إبن ذنبى إلى فدتك نفسى فإنى عنه بعدئذ أتوب

Let me know my sin, (may my life be ransomed for you),  
and verily, I shall then repent for it.

### **Tibaq (antithesis)**

This is another linguistic embellishment frequently found in his poem. It makes it easy for interested poets to copy Rusafi who employed word and its opposite in the following lines:

ضحكت مشارقها بوجهك بكرة وبكت مغاربها الدماء اصيلا

At the sight of your face the place of her rising (the east where  
the sun merges) smiles in the morning, and the where she sheds  
tears of blood in the evening.

تساوى لديها السهل والصعب فى السرى فما استسهلت سهلا ولا استصعبت صعبا

To it a level ground as well as a hard one is all the same in its  
nocturnal journey. So, it neither regards a plain tract plain nor  
a hard one hard.

Our poet, Rusafi used words like *dahikat*, *mashariq* and *bukrat* (smile, east and morning) with their opposites such as *bakat*, *magharib* and *asila* (sheds tears, west and evening) in the first line. In the same vein, *sahl* and *sa'b* (a level ground and a hard one) are two different words.

### **Prosodic Analysis**

The traditional sixteen meters are commonly used in Arabic prosody. Our poet employed different meters throughout his poem. The meter employed in a poem called *al-Qatirah* is called *Bahr Wafir* which consists of six *taf'ilah*, i.e.

مفاعلتن مفاعلتن مفاعلتن مفاعلتن مفاعلتن مفاعلتن

This mode of conventional meter is unemployed in the production of poetry. But the last *taf'ilah* in the first and second hemistiches, according to Qanawi, 1969:157, are abridged to *Mafa'al* which conforms to *Fa'uulun*. As a result, the normal meter for this poem will be rendered thus:

مفاعلتن مفاعلتن مفاعلتن مفاعلتن مفاعلتن مفاعلتن



## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is true that the west recognized Shawqi long before it did Rusafi, but the reason for this is that the European orientalisists came in contact with

Egypt long before they did with the rest of the Arabic-speaking world. They have, however, realized the worth of Rusafi so much that Professor Arberry of the

CambridgeUniversity, who rendered '*Majnun Layla*' the famous dramatic work of Shawqi into English, has also brought out an English version of the two poems of Rusafi, namely: *Ayatuhal-Ka'ab* ( O, the Blooming Girls!), *Ayqazur-Ruqud*

(The Awakening of the Slumberers).

Unlike other modern poets of 'Iraq, the poems of Ma'ruf al-Rusafi have won universal applause and approbation of his countrymen from all walks of life so much so that they are now sung even by the little school-boys all over 'Iraq and Syria. His *diwan* was included in the curriculum of all the secondary schools during his life-time and it continues to form part of it.

Rusafi is physically dead, no doubt, but he spiritually shall continue to live with us through his poems and writings as long as Arabic literature and language endure. The Arabic-speaking world has rightly been paying homage to his undying memory by annually celebrating his death anniversary.

Students should be encouraged to read most of ar-Rusafi's works for proper understanding of his educational background and his career as well as his contributions which will go a long way in shaping their outlook and providing inspirational model for them. A good number of our nationals must take a leaf from Rusafi's political, social and educational struggles to enable them sustain the laudable relationship among the populace.

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