Far-fetched Metaphor in Arabic Poetry According to Classical Arab Critics

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ABSTRACT:

This research aims to clarify the stance of classical Arab critics regarding the "far-fetched metaphor". To achieve this objective, the study employs a descriptive-analytical approach. It begins by defining metaphor and explaining its aesthetic function and expressive role in conveying ideas and meanings. The research then outlines the historical evolution of metaphor, tracing its shift from the simplicity and clarity found in early Arabic poetry to the obscurity and complexity characteristic of some poetry from the Abbasid era. Subsequently, the study identifies the parameters and quality standards for metaphors as established by critics. It then reviews the diverse perspectives held by critics concerning the far-fetched metaphor. Finally, the research concludes by summarizing the key findings.

Keywords: Arabic poetry, far-fetched metaphor, classical Arabic criticism.

1. Introduction

Metaphor is considered one of the most important rhetorical devices in the Arabic language. It is not merely an embellishment of words but a means of conveying ideas and meanings in an artistic and impactful manner. Through metaphor, a poet can link two distinct entities, thereby creating a novel image that stirs the listener or reader. In early Arabic poetry, this technique was characterized by simplicity, clarity, and ease of comprehension. However, as society and culture evolved, the metaphorical imagery employed by some poets began to lean toward complexity and ambiguity—particularly regarding the relationship between the two elements being linked. It is this new type of imagery that classical Arab critics termed "far-fetched metaphor".

-Significance of the Research: The significance of this research lies in its elucidation of the reasons why certain Arab critics rejected complex metaphorical images. It assists researchers - particularly non Arabs - in understanding the criteria that render Arabic speech aesthetically pleasing or unappealing. Furthermore, the study analyzes poetic metaphors that have historically sparked, and continue to spark, debate due to the ambiguity of the relationship between their constituent elements.

-Research Objectives: This research aims to achieve several objectives, most notably: demonstrating the aesthetic function of

metaphor; clarifying the distinction between "proximate" metaphors (easily understood by all) and "remote" metaphors (requiring deep reflection); and identifying the reasons why remote metaphors were deemed unappealing or unacceptable by some critics. Additionally, the study presents the views of prominent critics and examines how they addressed this stylistic issue.

-Research Problem: The research problem centers on a fundamental question: When does metaphor shift from a means of clarity and aesthetic beauty to a tool for ambiguity and obfuscation? Furthermore, how did early Arab critics establish precise criteria for evaluating metaphors described as "far-fetched"? Did such judgments stem from artistic rigidity or from a commitment to clarity and lucidity?

-Research Methodology: The study employs a descriptive-analytical approach to gather, organize, and analyze the scholarly material. It should be noted that the research cites only the specific segment of the verse containing the metaphor - the "locus of the example"- rather than presenting the full poetic verse when analyzing far-fetched metaphors and the critical reception thereof. This approach was adopted to avoid the risk of distorting the meaning that can arise when attempting to translate an entire poetic verse into English.

2. Presentation, Discussion, and Analysis

- Metaphor and its aesthetic and expressive function:

Metaphor is considered the fundamental pillar in the construction of literary imagery. It is not limited to the Arabic language alone but extends to human thought across diverse cultures. In its simplest form, metaphor is a linguistic process. This process relies on using a word in a sense other than its original, intended meaning—based on a relationship of resemblance connecting the literal meaning with the new meaning intended by the writer (see: Issa Al-Akoub, *Al-Mufassal fi ʻUlum al-Balagha*, p. 484; Abu Hilal al-Askari, *Al-Sinaʻatayn*, p. 295).

Metaphor in a literary work is not merely a tool for embellishing language; rather, it is an essential and indispensable means of conveying complex emotions and ideas. Direct language may sometimes fall short of capturing such meanings. When a poet wishes to describe a psychological state or a specific scene, they borrow an image from another realm and apply it to their subject. This innovative connection between the two elements of the metaphor -the source and the target- generates immense expressive power. This power grants the text a remarkable ability to evoke the reader's wonder and imprint the meaning upon their mind in an artistic and impactful manner.

Arab critics have elaborated extensively on this aesthetic quality; Abu Hilal al-Askari (d. 395 AH) posits that the function of metaphor lies in "interpreting and clarifying a meaning, or reinforcing and intensifying it." He notes that it helps condense the phrasing and enhances its aesthetic appeal, thereby "evoking an effect in the listener that is not produced by meanings conveyed through direct, literal expression" (*Al-Sinaʻatayn*, pp. 295–296). Underscoring its fundamental role, Al-Qadi al-Jurjani (d. 392 AH) regarded metaphor as "one of the primary pillars of speech, upon which one relies to expand and vary the modes of expressing meaning" (*Al-Wasatah*, p. 428). Al-Baqillani (d. 403 AH) went even further, attributing a power to the metaphorical term that surpasses direct expression; he described metaphor as "more impactful on the soul than a literal term, and more eloquent than the original phrasing designated for that meaning" [*Iʻjaz al-Qur'an*, p. 269].

The ability of these critics to unveil such aesthetic secrets stems from their refined literary taste and profound rhetorical insight. This insight enabled them to grasp how metaphor transcends the boundaries of ordinary language to generate more impactful meanings. In doing so, they laid the scholarly foundation for the text's transformation from mere ordinary speech into a work of art that resonates with the recipient.

-Criteria and Guidelines for Metaphor:

Arab critics established precise conditions for evaluating the quality of a metaphor, ensuring the preservation of language's fundamental function: clarification and clarity. These criteria center on the necessity of a strong link connecting the words to maintain the intellectual coherence of the literary image. Critics established "appropriateness" (*munāsabah*) as a prerequisite for accepting the image; Al-Qāḍī al-Jurjānī states: "A metaphor is valid and aesthetically pleasing only when there is a connection and a resemblance" [*Al-Wasāṭah*, p. 429]. This passage indicates that the beauty and artistic validity of a metaphor do not stem from novelty or strangeness, but rather from the existence of a logical connection and an appropriate relationship—acceptable to the mind—between the borrowed word and the new subject matter.

To achieve this aptness, rhetoricians require a connection to the linguistic root; as Abu Hilal al-Askari states: "Every metaphor and figurative expression must have a literal basis—the foundation for signifying meaning in language. There must also be a shared attribute between the object being borrowed and the source from which it is borrowed" [*Al-Sinaʿatayn*, p. 298]. This confirms that metaphor does not arise in a vacuum; rather, it must rest upon a fixed, literal meaning. Furthermore, the existence of a "shared attribute" between the two elements serves as the bridge across which the recipient's mind travels to grasp the literary intent without ambiguity.

This linguistic connection lies at the heart of the "foundations of poetry" criteria formulated by Al-Marzuqi (d. 421 AH), who stipulated the "suitability of the borrowed element to the object for which it is borrowed" (*Sharh Diwan al-Hamasa*, p. 11). This condition reflects a critical sensibility that rejects affectation; Al-Marzuqi holds that a successful metaphor is one that occupies its proper place, fulfilling its aesthetic purpose spontaneously and without straining the listener's intellect.

In the same vein, Al-Amidi (d. 370 AH) clarifies the limits of this congruity, stating: "The Arabs would transfer a meaning to another object only when it closely approached that object, resembled it in certain attributes, or stood in a causal relationship to it; thus, the borrowed word would be appropriate for the object to which it was applied and in harmony with its meaning" (*Al-Muwazana*, 1/266).

This text demonstrates that the Arabs did not employ metaphorical transfer haphazardly in their language; rather, they adhered to the bounds of proximity and resemblance, ensuring that the new term remained appropriate for - and in perfect harmony with - the intended meaning.

To illustrate these conditions and criteria, we examine the following two examples, which represent valid and acceptable metaphors:

The first example: "The light of knowledge illuminated the minds of researchers." In this image, the word "light" is borrowed to describe "knowledge." The connection between the two elements - the borrowed term and the concept to which it is applied - is strikingly clear: "guidance and the dispelling of darkness." Just as physical light banishes visual darkness and reveals the path to the eye, knowledge dispels the darkness of ignorance and reveals truths to the mind. This shared meaning and conceptual affinity render the metaphor apt and fully consistent with the standards set by critics.

The second example is: "Our heroes braved the sea of battle with valor." Here, the word "sea" is used metaphorically to describe the "battle." The link connecting the two concepts lies in their shared qualities of vastness, turbulence, and extreme danger. Just as the sea is characterized by vast, powerful waves that engulf those who enter it, the battle is marked by the expansive scope of its events, its chaotic nature, and the perils surrounding the combatants. This resemblance in attributes renders the term acceptable and fitting for the subject it describes.

These texts and examples demonstrate that the rhetorical thought of Arab critics was grounded in a refined sensibility that balanced the freedom of artistic expression with the need for clarity. For them, the value of a metaphor lies in its ability to convey and clarify meaning; this serves as a safeguard, preventing the imagery from veering into "far-fetched metaphor" or undesirable obscurity.

-The Evolution of Metaphorical Imagery:

A researcher of early Arabic poetry—particularly from the Pre-Islamic and early Islamic eras—observes that metaphor was characterized by simplicity and great clarity. This was not due to a lack of creativity; rather, it was a reflection of the nature of early Arab life, which was defined by simplicity and an innate, unadorned sensibility. The characteristics of this historical period can be outlined and detailed as follows:

-Environmental Influence: During this period, metaphorical imagery was drawn directly from the environment surrounding the Arab—such as nature, animals, and atmospheric phenomena. A prime example is Imru' al-Qays's famous metaphor describing the night: "with its loins, when it stretched out" (*Diwan Imru' al-Qays*, p. 3). The key elements here are the metaphor of the "loin" (referring to the back) and the image of "stretching" (referring to the extension of the body), both applied to the night. The connection is sensory, rooted in the desert environment, and conveys qualities of length, heaviness, and slowness—an image the Arab perceived instinctively and effortlessly.

-The immediacy and accessibility of the point of resemblance: The point of resemblance between the two terms of the metaphor (the borrowed element and the subject to which it is applied) is characterized by being immediate and easy to grasp; the reader does not require complex analytical processes to interpret it or understand its meaning. An example of this is the metaphor used by Abu Dhu'ayb al-Hudhali in the phrase "Death sank its claws in" (*Diwan al-Hudhaliyyin*, p. 3). The specific instance here involves borrowing the word "claws" - typically associated with a predatory animal - and attributing it to *al-maniyyah* (death/fate). The connection is immediate and mentally tangible, centering on the concepts of harm and utter destruction; the listener easily understands that death harms and destroys a person just as a predator destroys its prey, without the need for complex mental steps.

-The function of clarification and conveying meaning: During that period, the purpose of metaphor was to bring meaning closer to the listener and clarify it. It was not intended to showcase the poet's intellectual acuity by juxtaposing disparate concepts or rendering the meaning obscure and ambiguous. A simple example of this personification is found in Al-Khansā's elegy for her brother: "The year weeps for Sakhr." The key element here is the metaphorical attribution of "weeping" to "the year"—a term signifying a period of severe drought and barrenness. The connection is unmistakable: Al-Khansā' portrays the drought as a human figure weeping in sorrow over the loss of Sakhr, a man who used to aid others through his generosity. This personification enabled the poetess to clarify the meaning and powerfully convey the emotions of grief and loss.

These texts and examples, drawn from the great early poets, demonstrate that simplicity and a direct, tangible connection were the defining characteristics of metaphor in ancient Arabic poetry. Understanding this phase is crucial, as it establishes the critical benchmark against which all subsequent developments are measured; without grasping this natural clarity, one cannot comprehend why later critics rejected "far-fetched" metaphors, viewing them as an unacceptable departure from established Arab traditions of expressive clarity.

- The Evolution of Metaphor (The Stage of Transformation and Complexity):

The simplicity of the poetic image did not endure for long in Arabic poetry, as the Abbasid era witnessed profound cultural and intellectual shifts. These changes directly transformed the

nature of literary imagery and gave rise to what classical criticism termed the "far-fetched metaphor" (*al-isti'āra al-ba'īdah*) or the "forced metaphor" (*al-isti'āra al-mustakrahah*).

The Abbasid era witnessed a vast movement of translating Greek, Persian, and Indian sciences and literature. This led to the intermingling of Arab culture with philosophy, theology, and logic. Such an intellectual shift inclined the Arab poet's mindset toward synthesis and rational analysis, moving away from simple sensory observation. The desert environment, with its traditional vocabulary, was no longer sufficient to express the modern poet's consciousness; poets had become exposed to the life of palaces and great cities. Consequently, they began seeking a language capable of articulating this new intellectual outlook. This quest left its mark on the structure of metaphor, giving rise to what classical Arab critics termed the "far-fetched metaphor" (*al-isti'āra al-ba'īdah*).

This type of metaphor arises when the direct relationship—or the point of resemblance—between the two elements of the image (the borrowed term and the source of the borrowing) is obscured. The "distance" here refers to the extensive mental processing required for the listener to grasp the intended meaning. Consequently, the reader cannot comprehend the point of resemblance simply upon hearing the phrase or through casual reflection; instead, they are compelled to exert significant mental effort and analyze the imagery through a protracted process to arrive at the desired meaning. This stylistic shift caused the metaphor to deviate from established Arab conventions and the principles of traditional poetry, which typically demand a close, immediate connection between words. Thus, in the view of critics, the imagery was transformed from a means of clarifying and conveying meaning into a vehicle for ambiguity and complexity.

A movement of renewal and innovation—known as the *Badi'* school—was spearheaded by pioneering poets who sought to break away from the traditional structure of the Arabic poem. Foremost among them was the Abbasid poet Abu Tammam al-Ta'i (d. 231 AH). These poets deliberately devised novel metaphors previously unknown to the Arabs, often blending abstract concepts with material objects in unconventional ways. Their aim in adopting this approach was to astonish the listener, surprise them with unexpected imagery, and demonstrate their own intellectual and linguistic prowess. It is this tendency toward exaggeration and artificiality in phrasing and imagery that led critics to oppose this movement. They viewed such excessive remoteness as detrimental to the beauty of the language, transforming it into riddles that were difficult to comprehend. Consequently, the "remote metaphor" came to be regarded as a flaw in poetic composition and a criterion for poor-quality poetry in classical Arabic criticism.

-The Stance of Arab Critics on Far-Fetched Metaphor:

In his book *Al-Badi'*, Ibn al-Mu'tazz (d. 295 AH) attempted to establish clear boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable metaphors. One example he singled out for criticism and objection was the poet's line: "Eat *sabr* [patience/aloe] while fresh, and drink it." He commented: "This -and similar instances of metaphor - is considered a flaw in poetry" [*Al-Badi'*, p. 23]. The error in this imagery stems from a lack of congruity and suitability; the poet borrowed tangible, physical attributes associated with fresh food and drink - such as eating, drinking, and freshness - and applied them to an abstract, psychological concept: patience. The element of far-fetchedness - and indeed ugliness - arises here from the absence of any shared attribute between the two terms. Neither rational logic nor linguistic sensibility can discern a connection that would allow "bitter patience" to be transformed into a soft substance suitable for eating or drinking. This renders the poetic image excessively contrived and contrary to linguistic norms; such extreme far-fetchedness turns the metaphor from a tool for clarifying meaning into a device that jars the listener's taste and distorts the very concept of the utterance.

Al-Āmidī is considered the critic who most vehemently rejected the use of far-fetched metaphors by poets. He stood at the forefront of those who evaluated poetic imagery using the yardstick of reason and logic. Al-Āmidī examined the poetry of Abū Tammām as a case study of artistic shifts in imagery that transcend the bounds of common understanding. He characterized such images as far-fetched and unsightly; for instance, he noted that the poet: "attributed a hand to Time - one that could be severed - and depicted it as a person who fights with others, rejoices in the company of the noble, and laughs, while also portraying 'the Days' as having dominion over it. He likewise attributed a hand to Praise, depicted Glory as capable of fear and harboring malice - endowing it with a body and internal organs - and portrayed 'the Days' as having a back like a beast of burden to be ridden. He even likened nights to menstruating women - metaphors that are utterly hideous, grotesque, and far removed from propriety" [*Al-Muwāzanah*, 1/265, adapted].

Al-Āmidī's critique is grounded in a clear perspective: the aesthetic value of a metaphor ceases when the harmony between meaning and reason is lost. The critical basis for rejecting such imagery lies in the intellectual impossibility of the meaning conveyed; the poet attributes tangible, physical qualities - such as hands, bodies, or livers - to abstract, non-material concepts that cannot be physically embodied in reality. Similarly, attributing human or natural actions - such as suffering seizures, smiling, riding, or menstruation - to days and nights results in logically impossible imagery. This stems from the absence of any shared attribute or natural connection between the terms involved. Al-Āmidī maintains that excessive juxtaposition of disparate ideas causes the metaphor to deviate from its primary function-clarifying and revealing meaning - and transforms it into an unacceptable riddle that the mind can neither comprehend nor visualize.

In his book *Al-Risalah al-Muwaddihah*, Al-Hatimi (d. 388 AH) represents a school of criticism that analyzed the poetry of Al-Mutanabbi. This study aimed to identify instances of imagery that violated the standards of effective metaphor. One prominent example he criticized is Al-Mutanabbi's line: "He possesses an ambition that butts the two luminaries [the sun and the moon]." Al-Hatimi rejected the use of the verb *tantuḥ* ("to butt" or "to ram with the head") due to its crudeness and unsuitability for praising distinguished figures; he deemed the word objectionable, unacceptable, and unused by masters of eloquence (*Al-Risalah al-Muwaddihah*, p. 98).

In his book *Al-Sina'atayn* (The Two Arts), Abu Hilal al-Askari represents a continuation of the school of rational and social thought. He dedicated a section of the work to gathering examples of metaphors that strayed into the realm of the unacceptable. Among these, al-Askari cited the poet's phrase "as if glory had grown senile" (*ka'anna al-majd qad kharafa*), immediately followed by another example: "upon the liver of benevolence" (*'ala kabid al-ma'ruf*) [*Al-Sina'atayn*, p. 305]. Al-Askari selected these examples within the context of critiquing metaphors that lack affinity and congruity. The flaw—manifesting as remoteness and ugliness—lies in the conceptual impossibility of the meaning and the erroneous nature of the personification; in the first example, the poet attributes senility—a mental and psychological decline affecting the human mind in old age—to "glory," an abstract concept that possesses no mind. In the second example, the poet assigns a tangible physical organ—the liver—to "an act of kindness," which is an abstract, moral concept. A sense of remoteness arises here due to the absence of a shared attribute or a natural connection that the mind can readily accept; the listener is compelled to navigate a series of widely disparate mental steps in an attempt to graft physical organs and human ailments onto abstract ideas that cannot be embodied as material objects. This approach disrupts linguistic conventions and displaces words from their appropriate contexts. Consequently, the metaphorical expression

shifts from a tool for clarification and meaning-revealing into a source of obscurity that taxes the listener's mind. Through this collection of examples, Al-Askari affirms that the aesthetic value of a metaphor is always contingent upon its proximity and compatibility with the concept to which it is applied.

Al-Qadi al-Jurjani, in his book *Al-Wasatah*, embodied a stance of critical moderation and fairness. He did not consider "remoteness" in a metaphor to be an inherent flaw; rather, he defended Al-Mutanabbi's innovative ideas by demonstrating that they had precedents and parallels among the poets of old. This is clearly evident in his discussion of the objections raised against Al-Mutanabbi's line: "One of them fills the heart of Time." Critics had taken issue with the use of the word "heart" (*fu'ad*) to describe "Time," deeming the imagery far-fetched and lacking any close resemblance. Al-Qadi al-Jurjani addressed this criticism by gathering numerous poetic examples from both ancient and modern poets—poets who had already attributed a face, an eye, a hand, and a back to Time. Defending Al-Mutanabbi, Al-Jurjani remarked: "These poets portrayed Time as a figure with fully formed limbs and a complete body; how, then, could you object to Abu al-Tayyib attributing a heart to it?" [*Al-Wasatah*, pp. 316–317]. In this commentary, Al-Jurjani proceeds from a rhetorical perspective that rejects rigidity in rule-making; he maintains that a far-fetched metaphor becomes acceptable and accessible if it is grounded in established poetic conventions. The comparison here serves to demonstrate the logical coherence of the artistic image. Since literary tradition has accepted the personification of Time as a being possessing tangible external features—such as a face, hands, and a back—a poet is entitled to extend this imagery by attributing an internal organ to Time: the *fu'ād* (heart). This serves to symbolize Time's capacity to contain momentous events. Thus, Al-Qadi Al-Jurjani demonstrates that Al-Mutanabbi's metaphor is not an objectionable departure from propriety; rather, it is an acceptable expansion of meaning rooted in the traditions of ancient Arabic poetic imagination. Al-Jurjani emphasized that any judgment regarding the ugliness of a "far-fetched" metaphor cannot be made in isolation from an examination of similar examples within Arabic poetry. Since literary tradition has accepted the personification of Time as a being possessing tangible external features—such as a face, hands, and a back—a poet is entitled to extend this imagery by attributing an internal organ to Time: the *fu'ād* (heart). This serves to symbolize Time's capacity to contain momentous events. Thus, Al-Qadi Al-Jurjani demonstrates that Al-Mutanabbi's metaphor is not an objectionable departure from propriety; rather, it is an acceptable expansion of meaning rooted in the traditions of ancient Arabic poetic imagination. Al-Jurjani emphasized that any judgment regarding the ugliness of a "far-fetched" metaphor cannot be made in isolation from an examination of similar examples within Arabic poetry. Since literary tradition has accepted the personification of Time as a being possessing tangible external features—such as a face, hands, and a back—a poet is entitled to extend this imagery by attributing an internal organ to Time: the *fu'ād* (heart). This serves to symbolize Time's capacity to contain momentous events. Thus, Al-Qadi Al-Jurjani demonstrates that Al-Mutanabbi's metaphor is not an objectionable departure from propriety; rather, it is an acceptable expansion of meaning rooted in the traditions of ancient Arabic poetic imagination. Al-Jurjani emphasized that any judgment regarding the ugliness of a "far-fetched" metaphor cannot be made in isolation from an examination of similar examples within Arabic poetry.

3. Conclusion and Research Findings

Ultimately, the "far-fetched metaphor" (*al-isti'āra al-ba'īdah*) constituted a fundamental issue in classical Arabic literary criticism. This issue revealed the nature of the tension between preserving established linguistic conventions and the desire to keep pace with emerging cultural and intellectual shifts. By examining the views of various critics, this research has yielded several significant findings. The first is that, for early

Arab critics, the quality of a metaphorical image depended on the presence of connection and congruity—qualities essential for ensuring clarity and the comprehension of meaning. The second finding is that the emergence of the far-fetched metaphor was not merely a fleeting linguistic error; rather, it was an artistic expression of the evolution of Arab thought during the Abbasid era, reflecting a growing inclination toward abstract concepts and philosophical constructs. The third conclusion is that critical assessments of these images diverged into two approaches. The first represents a stance of logical rigor—championed by Al-Amidi, Ibn al-Mu'tazz, and Al-'Askari—that rejected far-fetched metaphors. The second reflects the flexible, historically comparative approach employed by Al-Qadi al-Jurjani in his defense of Al-Mutanabbi's metaphors. Ultimately, the study concludes that Arab criticism did not reject the freedom of poetic imagination; rather, it established clarity as a principled safeguard for language's function in human communication. Criticism affirmed that the aesthetic value of figurative expression remains contingent upon the soundness of its logical structure and the listener's ability to comprehend and visualize it without difficulty or affectation.

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