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HUMOR IN ABU AL-SHAMAQMAQ'S POETRY: A UNIQUE APPROACH TO STUDYING A CLASSICAL ARABIC POEM

Abstract. This research presents an innovative methodology for teaching and studying classical Arabic poetry, with particular emphasis on its humorous elements. The study centers on analyzing the works of the Abbasid poet Abu al-Shamaqmaq, employing contemporary theories of humor in the examination of his poetic output. This approach, developed as part of my doctoral thesis,² integrates theoretical frameworks derived from psychology, philosophy, and sociology with the practical analysis of classical Arabic poems. The methodology offers a novel interdisciplinary perspective on understanding and interpreting medieval Arabic literary humor.

This article is divided into two sections. The theoretical section provides a brief overview of selected theories of humor. The practical section applies these chosen theories to the poem, demonstrating how these theories manifest within it.

Keywords: Humor, Abu al-Shamaqmaq's poem, contemporary theories of humor, Superiority Theory, Incongruity Theory, Relief Theory, GTVH

The theoretical section (theories of humor)

Superiority Theory

The theory expresses the feeling of enjoyment one experiences when recognizing weaknesses in others, and sometimes in oneself. People often target deficiencies,

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It is noteworthy that this approach was adopted by Ali Hussein, the doctoral advisor, in his article. For more details, see: Ali Ahmad Hussein, "The Fat Bride and The Foolish Messengers: Humorizing the Love Theme in An Early Islamic Poem", *Humor* 35 (2022).

weaknesses, and inherent flaws in others' personalities, making these shortcomings the subject of mockery and derision (Lintott 2016: 347; Nijholt 2015: 405; Pebesma 2017: 3). Superiority Theory is considered the earliest theory of humor. The concept of this theory first emerged in Plato's (427 BCE – 347 BCE) account of Socrates (470 BCE – 399 BCE), who believed that recognizing weakness in another person is a source of amusement and a trigger for laughter. In this context, laughter is viewed as an attack on this weakness through the domination of the individual harboring it (Simões 2017: 26; Astolfi 2007: 18).

Aristotle (384 BCE – 322 BCE) first elucidated the concept of this theory in his *Poetics*, where he observed that weakness is the source of humor, with laughter expressing a pleasurable feeling of superiority over another person who appears to us as foolish, ugly, or repulsive (Holoch 2012: 20; Safa & Ghonchehpour 2017: 53; Astolfi 2008: 288).

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) was considered its founder. Hobbes viewed that the passion for laughter is nothing but a sudden glory arising from a sudden conception of some superiority in ourselves when compared to the weakness and folly of others, or to our own former failings (Morreall 1982: 244; Lippitt 1991: 52-53; Pebesma 2017: 5).

Incongruity Theory

Many theorists affirm that the dominant theory of humor is the Incongruity Theory. The theory's origins can be traced to the eighteenth century, followed by the subsequent emergence of the concept of humorous incongruity, which has been extensively examined within the analytical framework of joke studies during the latter part of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century (Safa & Ghonchehpour 2017: 52; Simões 2017: 25; Nijholt 2018: 409). Proponents of this theory believe that contradiction is the essence of humor in the text. Humor manifests when contradictory dualities exist within the text, as a certain idea appears through the text and soon after turns out to be incorrect, thus creating a sudden change in the reader's thoughts, which forms a contradiction that generates humor (Zhan 2012: 95; Saude 2018: 3; أيعلتون 2019: 83).

Some scholars believe that the father of this theory is the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), while others see that its origin dates back to Aristotle's time but it evolved through the efforts of other pioneering philosophers and researchers of this theory, such as Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860). The concept of the theory first appeared indirectly in some of Aristotle's scattered comments when he defended the viewpoint that laughter occurs due to setting up an expectation at first and then experiencing the opposite of what was expected in the end. The greater the contrast between two contradictory things, the stronger becomes the probability of humor (Safa & Ghonchehpour 2017: 52).

Similarly, Schopenhauer posited that laughter is simply an expression of the sudden realization of the contradiction between the idea presented in a certain situation and a person's thoughts that conflict with that idea (Morreall 1982: 3, 16; Lippitt 1991: 17; Boyd 2004: 4; Twark 2007: 14).

In this context, Henri Bergson (1859-1941), in his book *Laughter*, stated that laughter has both human and social meanings; therefore, he initially focused on human behavior, actions, and movements that cause laughter and can be described by means of verbal jokes. He also pointed out that there is nothing funny outside of what is purely human; a scene might be beautiful, might mean nothing, or might be ugly, but it is never funny unless it relates to what is human. This is because people laugh when they see an animal acting like a human or imitating a human. They might laugh at the sight of a hat, where what's funny isn't the piece of cloth itself but rather the shape of the person wearing it; it is the human element that is embodied in that amusing model (رياض 1998: 63-64).

Relief Theory

The theory postulates that laughter stems from situations that force a person to experience uncomfortable feelings, and, consequently, laughter becomes the reaction through which a person is liberated from uncomfortable feelings, such as embarrassment and tension resulting from hostile and sometimes embarrassing situations (Antonovici 2015: 421).

Philosopher Earl Shaftesbury (1671-1713) was one of the earliest supporters of this theory, and he expressed this in his book *Sensus Communis*, in which he included an essay about humor and addressed the definition of humor and the things that generate it (Anderson 2007: 6-7). Shaftesbury believed that humor should be taken as a mechanism for venting and liberation, whereby people find in it a refuge to achieve a kind of comfort and an escape from social criticism (Simões 2017: 6-7). This idea also emerged in Aristotle's comments, who emphasized that the power of laughter lies in releasing nervous tension, although it wasn't carefully developed until the nineteenth century.

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) stated that the function of humor is releasing tension and energy rather than providing stimuli that could be considered funny and entertaining (Simões 2017: 6-7). Freud believed that laughter occurs in situations where people typically experience negative emotions, such as fear, sadness, or anger, as the pleasure of humor arises from releasing energy that was connected to these painful feelings but has become excessive. He considered humor to be one of the alternative mechanisms that enable the transformation of socially forbidden (unacceptable) aggressive impulses into acceptable ones (Road 1998: 18; Krikmann 2006: 38).

The General Theory of Verbal Humour

Researchers Victor Raskin and Salvatore Attardo aimed to build the GTVH (General Theory of Verbal Humour) in 1991. They included six knowledge resources (six parameters or criteria) for verbal jokes, arranging them in a hierarchical model, and they examined jokes and texts in foreign languages (not Arabic) to demonstrate the criteria that formed humor in each of these texts (Krikmann 2006: 31; Saude 2018: 5,8). The main claim of the GTVH model is that jokes or texts are similar to each other along six knowledge resources such as language, narrative strategy, target, situation, contradiction, and logical mechanism.

1. Script Opposition

It aims to highlight the contradictions existing in human communication, thinking, or perception: when humorous speech is interpreted, it generates a number of contradictions that the recipient must resolve in their final interpretation (Ortega 2013: 597; Krikmann 2006: 38).

2. Logical Mechanism

This source is considered the most problematic and controversial in the GTVH model. This is because the logical mechanism does not contribute to identifying humor in the text nor does it provide a definitive explanation for the contradiction that generates humor (Saude 2018: 10-11; Ortega 2013: 597; Hussein 2022: 258; Hempelmann & Ruch 2005: 364).

3. Situation

By this source is meant the basic situation in which the joke occurs, or everything surrounding the humor, that is, the context that evokes and generates the framework in the humor discourse (Ortega 2013: 597). Originally, the situation refers to the remaining components of the text's content or a diverse set of other characters, actions, and things. In other words, there is a collection of details (such as time, place, topics, or activities) that contribute to creating humor in the text (Safa & Ghonchehpour 2017: 53; Saude 2018: 10).

4. Target

It is the target of the joke, which refers to the person or stereotype that the joke targets. Many jokes can have more than one specific target, not just a single one (Binsted 1996: 18).

5. Narrative Strategy

This source determines the image that the joke will take or the form of the narrative organization for its delivery. It also describes the style of humor employed in the text (Willibald, Attardo, Raskin 1993: 124; Krikmann 2006: 37).

6. Language

This refers to the actual verbal expression of the joke through which its content is conveyed. This source focuses on revealing the linguistic components of the text that contribute to creating humor, including phonetic (sound pronunciation), phonological, morphological, lexical, grammatical, and semantic components. Additionally, it highlights wordplay, emphasizes puns with similar words but different meanings, and the technique of repetition (Willibald, Attardo, Raskin 1993: 124; Saude 2018: 9; Attardo 2017: 134; Al-Hajaj & Alabbad 2014: 156).

Analytical section

Abu al-Shamaqmaq

The poet Marwan ibn Muhammad, who was nicknamed Abu al-Shamaqmaq (died 180-200 AH / 797-815 CE) because he was – apparently – "with a large nose, protruding cheeks, and an ugly appearance". He was of Khurasani origin, a client (mawla) of the Umayyad Caliph Marwan ibn Muhammad (caliphate years 127-132 AH / 744-750 CE). He was raised in Basra and came to Baghdad during the caliphate of al-Rashid (caliphate years 170-193 AH / 786-809 CE) or shortly before, and he became associated with the Barmakids and their officials (التَّجَار 1997: 35; غرنيان 1959: 121; نور الدين 2003: 304).

Abu al-Shamaqmaq was a powerful poet, representing the popular poetic trend in the Abbasid era. He was a satirist and the greatest poet who depicted the ordeal of misery in the Abbasid period. Therefore, the factors of poverty and deprivation drove him to frustration, annoyance, and a tendency towards mockery and sarcasm in his poetry (Papoutsakis 2017: 41; العبيدي 2019: 330; رفاعي 2021: 5573). He portrayed his bitter reality in his poetry with a delightful humorous style to express his poverty. What is most amusing is that he employed animal scenes to paint a picture of the poverty that had befallen him, wrapping it in an atmosphere of humor. An example of this is the amusing dialogic scene he created with a cat, reflecting the state of poverty in his home (العبيدي: 332). The poem aims to highlight the human right to a dignified life under a state that ensures prosperity for all citizens without discrimination. It seems

this was lacking in some periods of the Abbasid era, or at least this was the case for Abu al-Shamqamaq and those like him. This poem can be considered a message directed to the caliphs and authorities, urging them to pay attention to the people's destiny and vital interests, away from selfishness. To a great extent, it reveals the depth of pain and suffering experienced by the poor classes, including humiliation, deprivation, misery, and extreme poverty (المصري 2011: 182, 185).

قال أبو الشَّمَقْمَق في الفأر والسَّنُور: [الخفيف، القافية "لاره"]

1. وَلَقَدْ قُلْتُ حِينَ أَفْقَرَ بَيْتِي مِنْ جِرَابِ الدَّقِيقِ وَالْفَخَّارَةِ³
2. وَلَقَدْ كَانَ أَهْلًا غَيْرَ فَقْرٍ مُخَصَّبًا خَيْرُهُ كَثِيرَ الْعِمَارَةِ
3. فَارَى الْفَأْرَ قَدْ تَجَنَّبَنِي بَيْتِي عَائِدَاتٍ مِنْهُ بَدَارِ الْإِمَارَةِ
4. وَدَعَا بِالرَّحِيلِ ذَبَانُ بَيْتِي بَيْنَ مَقْصُوصَةٍ إِلَى طَيَّارَةِ
5. وَأَقَامَ السَّنُورُ فِي الْبَيْتِ حَوْلًا مَا يَرَى فِي جَوَانِبِ الْبَيْتِ فَارَةً
6. يُنْغَضُ الرُّأْسُ مِنْهُ مِنْ شِدَّةِ الْجُورِ عَ وَعَيْشٍ فِيهِ أَدَى وَمَرَارَةِ
7. قُلْتُ لَمَّا رَأَيْتُهُ نَاكِسَ الرَّأْيِ سِ كُنْيَا، فِي الْجَوْفِ مِنْهُ حَرَارَةِ
8. وَبِكَ صَبْرًا فَأَنْتَ مِنْ خَيْرِ سَنَوٍ رِ رَأْتُهُ عَيْنَايَ قَطَّ بِحَارَةِ
9. قَالَ: لَا صَبْرَ لِي وَكَيْفَ مُقَامِي بِمَبِيتٍ فَقْرٍ كَجَوْفِ الْمَنَارَةِ
10. قُلْتُ: سِرْ رَاشِدًا إِلَى بَيْتِ جَارٍ مُخَصَّبٍ رَحْلُهُ عَظِيمِ التَّجَارَةِ
11. وَإِذَا الْعَنْكَبُوتُ تَغَزَلَ فِي دَنَدَنٍ نِي وَجَبِي وَالْكَوْزِ وَالْقَرْقَارَةِ
12. وَأَصَابَ الْجَحَامُ كَلْبِي فَأَضْحَى بَيْنَ كَلْبٍ وَكَلْبَةٍ عَيَّارَةِ

The poem's opening reveals the poet's state of extreme poverty and misery. The poet exaggerates in describing his house, now empty of food – like flour sacks or pottery – and no longer visited by guests as it was before. The poet described his wretched condition with a sarcastic, humorous, and indirect style (self-mockery). He highlighted the poor condition of the animals inhabiting his house more than discussing his own suffering. He portrayed mice and flies fleeing his home, seeking refuge and a better place to live. He dramatically depicted the cat that lived with him, which remained in the house for a year unable to catch mice or find food, until it became dejected, moving its head in bewilderment and depression from extreme hunger and from life's bitterness.

He tried to console the cat and boast about it, hoping it would stay, but the cat refused to endure and escaped seeking a more fertile place (Papoutsakis

³ إبراهيم النَّجَّار، شعراء عَبَّاسِيُون، 42.

2017: 45). In this, he exaggerated in depicting the prevailing bitterness, his miserable state, and the intensity of his poverty in a way that exceeded reality, with the purpose of expressing his inner desire to find humor in his situation through a strange exaggeration. He continued his exaggeration by describing his dog suffering from mange due to extreme hunger, and the spider that became the house's sole inhabitant, weaving its web over water vessels after visitors disappeared. This metaphorically referenced his intense poverty, echoing a hadith from Ali ibn Abi Talib warning that spider webs in a house attract poverty (العالمی 1983: 322).

The humor analysis in this text is based on five knowledge resources from the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH model), which are: Situation, Target, Contradiction, Language, and Narrative Strategy. This is as follows:

First, Situation: A poet complaining about the severity of his poverty and suffering, calling on the animals living with him not to leave. He portrayed flies and mice fleeing his house, with only the spider and the cat remaining, the latter intending to leave. The poet then rushes to convince the cat not to depart.

Second, Target: In the poem, there are two targets: a direct target and an indirect one. The direct objective centers on the poet Abu Al-Shamqamq himself, who considered himself a target to mock his own situation, hoping to win the Caliph's sympathy and potentially beg for money from the ruling class – according to the poem's context.

The indirect target involves criticizing the wealthy class in the Abbasid era who were stingy with their money and showed no compassion for the poor. This is subtly indicated when the poet describes his miserable condition and the suffering experienced by the animal living with him. Through this, he condemns and reproaches the ruling class that leaves its subjects in a poor economic and social state, without extending a helping hand or spending from their abundant wealth.

Third, Script Opposition: Two main dualities emerged in the poem: the animal-human duality and the reality-imagination duality. The animal-human duality is evident in the poet's use of personification, where he gave the animal human characteristics and behaviors. For example, he invited the fly to visit his house and made the cat speak, repeatedly using the verb "to say" to demonstrate equality between himself and the talking animal. The poet also attributed human traits to the cat, such as describing him as "head-lowered" and "mature", and even placed the cat in a higher position than humans by offering him consolation and repeatedly encouraging him to be patient. This was done to implore the cat not to leave him and to keep him company.

The poet's use of personification, in which he portrayed the cat as a human being who suffers, endures, and then ultimately loses patience, led to highlighting contradiction and provoking surprise and laughter. This is because he found in the cat a human-like situation or expression, which is both unreal and unfamiliar. According to Henri Bergson, one of the conditions of laughter is

that it occurs when a being begins to adopt human behavioral patterns; the animal becomes comical when it reminds us of something human (جاء: 2004: 37; رفاعي: 5805).

Bergson addressed this in his book *Laughter*, finding that humor emerges when there is a proximity between the animal and human in humorous text. Attributing human characteristics or actions to an animal is a catalyst for laughter. Humans often laugh when they observe similarities between an animal and themselves, especially when the animal displays a human-like situation, expression, or behavior (بيرغسون: 1987: 10; جاء: 37).

In other words, humor emerged when the animal was elevated above the human; the cat held power over the human, placing the human in a lower position, as the cat appeared to be arrogant towards its caretaker. The humor also surfaced when the animal was given human characteristics, speaking, expressing anger, and threatening to leave due to the lack of food in the house. While an animal's natural response to no food is to seek sustenance elsewhere, the comedic element lies in expressing its emotions and discontent before departing (جبير: 2022: 10).

Additionally, the duality of reality and imagination emerged, with the poem blending the expected and unexpected. In the first two verses, the reader anticipates the poet depicting his poor house and lamenting his condition, but finds the opposite. Instead, the poet focused on the misfortunes of the animals inhabiting his house rather than dwelling on his own suffering or explicitly highlighting his poverty. He subtly revealed his poverty through various allusions, such as the line: "The cat resided in the house for a year \ Never seeing anything but barren corners", which symbolizes the emptiness of the poet's dwelling. Similarly, the image of spider webs covering water vessels serves as another indicator of extreme poverty.

Moreover, the poet employed imagination and exaggeration as a comedic technique by depicting animals with human-like behaviors and expressions. The animals spoke like humans, and the poet showed them significant attention, focusing more on the cat's suffering than his own. He even pleaded with the cat to remain in the house. Portraying these scenes represents an imaginative construct aimed at humorously and comically describing the poet's misery and poverty in a manner that provokes laughter in the reader, as the situation is both unfamiliar and surprising.

According to the previous analysis, the theory of superiority is evident in both dualities, particularly in the overall poem. The fundamental superiority is that of the animal over the human, manifested in the poet's greater empathy for the cat than for himself. He is deeply preoccupied with the cat's suffering, disregarding his own. The poet attributed human characteristics to the animal instead of treating it normally, with the purpose of presenting the cat at a superior level to the human (the poet). This deliberate elevation of the animal creates a satirical and humorous perspective that challenges traditional hierarchies.

From another perspective, we can consider the superiority demonstrated by the Abbasid authorities and wealthy class over the poor. As seen in the poem's context, the poet addressed his poem as a message to the wealthy ruling class, including the Caliphs, calling for attention to the people's dire situation, which they had callously ignored, appearing superior to their own people. Additionally, we observe a self-deprecating superiority where the poet places himself in a position lower than that of the animal, further emphasizing the social critique embedded in the poem.

Furthermore, we can observe the theory of liberation or catharsis manifested in these two dualities. The cat's anger and reaction can be seen as an insult and humiliation to the poet and his home, representing a form of sadistic amusement. In the ninth verse, the cat mockingly compares the poet's dwelling to the interior of a minaret, expressing such dissatisfaction that he strongly refuses to endure the conditions he finds himself in.

Fourth, Language: As demonstrated above, language served the comedic content by employing imagination and exaggeration as humor mechanisms through personifying animals and making them speak like humans. This is evident in the poet's pleading with the cat to stay, urging patience, and focusing more on the cat's suffering than his own. Depicting these scenes represents an imaginative construct aimed at humorously describing the poet's miserable state, provoking laughter through unfamiliarity and surprise. It's unexpected for someone to forget their own troubles and instead console an intruder, advising them to manage their affairs rather than addressing their own situation.

Moreover, exaggeration emerged through the simile in the ninth verse, where the cat compared the poet's house to the interior of a minaret. This comparison contains satire aimed at diminishing the poet's status while elevating the cat's superiority.⁴

The poet alluded to his poverty through several rhetorical devices, such as: "The cat resided in the house for a year \ Never seeing anything but barren corners\ spider webs covering water vessels". This implies extreme poverty, as mice typically appear where food exists, and their absence suggests complete destitution. These subtle linguistic hints effectively communicate the poet's dire economic situation without directly stating it, creating a powerful and nuanced representation of his impoverished state.

In addition, repetition dominated the poem: the verb "to say" was repeated four times to demonstrate equality between the poet and the talking animal. The word "house" appeared three times, indicating his impoverished state. Animals like "cat", "mouse", and "dog" were mentioned twice to elevate their status over the poet. The word "patience" was repeated twice, pleading with the cat not to leave the poet's house.

⁴ أحمد السيد أبو المجد، شعراء الظل في العصر العباسي الأول (الأردن: دار جرير للنشر والتوزيع، 2010)، 139.

Fifth, narrative strategy: the poet employed humor throughout the poem, primarily through the human-animal duality. He created a comedic scene by depicting the mice and fly fleeing from his house, showing their aversion. In the subsequent verses, he exaggerated by personifying the cat, attributing human characteristics like being “mature” and “gloomy”, and creating a dialogue where he pleads with the cat to stay.

The humor peaks with the cat’s satirical comparison of the poet’s house to the interior of a minaret, which serves to mock the poet and elevate the cat’s status. This highlighted the absurd contrast between the expected and actual situation, emphasizing the poet’s poverty and the unconventional narrative.

The comedic scene also appears in the final two verses, where the poet illustrates how his misery has driven away all of God’s creatures. Some fled willingly or reluctantly, leaving behind only the spider weaving its web over water vessels destined for ruin, and his dog suffering from mange. Who knows, they might eventually complain and request permission to depart (عثمان 2022: 23).

Conclusion

By applying modern humor theories to classical Arabic poetry, we gain new insights into the literary techniques and social commentary of poets like Abu al-Shamaqmaq. This approach offers a fresh and engaging way to teach classical Arabic literature, making it more accessible and relatable to contemporary students. By understanding the humor in these ancient poems, we create a bridge between past and present, allowing us to appreciate the timeless nature of human experiences and social critique.

This analysis of Abu al-Shamaqmaq’s poetry demonstrates the enduring power of humor as a tool for social commentary and artistic expression. By applying modern theories to classical works, we gain a deeper appreciation for the complexity and relevance of Arabic literature across the ages.

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