

**Journal of Religion & Society (JR&S)**

Available Online:

<https://islamicreligious.com/index.php/Journal/index>

Print ISSN: 3006-1296 Online ISSN: 3006-130X

Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)**The Role of Khutbas and Letters in the Growth of Arabic Literature: A Literary Justification****Mubashar Hasnain**

PHD Scholar

The University of Faisalabad

[ranamubasharhusnain789@gmail.com](mailto:ranamubasharhusnain789@gmail.com)**Prof. Dr. Matloob Ahmad (Corresponding Author)**

Dean Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

The University of Faisalabad

[dean.is@tuf.edu.pk](mailto:dean.is@tuf.edu.pk)**Abstract**

The two cornerstones of Arabic literary tradition were poetry, which constituted the imaginative substance of the Jahili Arabs, and prose, which eventually gained in stature and range from poetry and eventually surpassed it. The khutba (oration) and the risala (epistle) are amongst the earliest genres of Arabic prose. The present study looks at the two genres and their influence on the form of Arabic literature from the late Jahili period to the early Abbasid era. It suggests that the khutba provided rhetorical support for the development of classical Arabic eloquence (balagha), and the risala facilitated the growth of the calligraphic style of artful prose (al-nathr al-fanni) and the bureaucratic register of the Islamic state. The paper investigates a literary continuity that connects the orators of Suq Ukaz, the sermons of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs, and the secretarial letters of Abd al-Hamid al-Katib and Ibn al-Muqaffa, all based on Quranic pronouncements on bayan, prophetic traditions about eloquent speech, and authentic documents from the first few centuries of Islam. The results validate the conclusion that if these two types were not present, Arabic prose would have lacked both moral gravity and stylistic finesse.

**Keywords:** Khutba, Risala, Arabic prose, Balagha, Nahj al-Balagha, Abd al-Hamid al-Katib, Bayan, Arabic literary history.

**1. Introduction**

Arabic literature has long been celebrated for the splendour of its poetry, yet its prose tradition is no less rich and is, in many respects, more intimately bound to the religious and political life of the Muslim community. The earliest forms of Arabic prose did not arise in a vacuum. They grew out of two practical needs of human society: the need to address gatherings of people and the need to communicate at a distance. From these twin needs emerged the *khutba* and the *risala*, two streams that would carry the Arabic language from the markets of pre-Islamic Arabia into the chanceries of Damascus and Baghdad and, eventually, into the literary salons of the Andalus.

The Quran itself bears witness to the value placed upon articulate speech. In Surah al-Rahman, the Almighty declares: “Al-Rahman, ‘allama al-Qur’an, khalaqa al-insan, ‘allamahu al-bayan” – “The Most Merciful taught the Quran. He created man and taught him eloquence” (Quran 55:1–4). The Arabic term *bayan* here signifies not merely speech but the capacity to make meaning clear and to move the hearer toward right action. This Quranic emphasis upon *bayan* provides the theological foundation for the centrality of the khutba and the risala in Arabic literary history.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have remarked: “*Inna mina al-bayani la-sihran*” – “Indeed, in some eloquence there is magic” (Sahih al-Bukhari, Kitab al-Nikah, Hadith 5146). His own sermons and letters became living models that successive generations of orators and secretaries strove to emulate. To study the khutba and the risala is therefore not merely a literary exercise; it is an entry into the moral and political imagination of the early Muslim community.

The present paper provides a literary basis for asserting that the khutba and the risala were the backbone of classical Arabic prose. It does so in 3 movements. The first, it places the two genres in the religious and cultural soil of which they are a product. Secondly, it sets out its evolution from the Jahiliyya to the early Abbasid era. Thirdly, it highlights the literary contributions which each genre made to the fabric of Arabic letters.

## 2. The Religious and Cultural Foundation of Arabic Eloquence

Though the Arabs of the Jahiliyya never had a written culture, they valued the ability to speak well as a measure of personal honor and tribal prestige. Poets and orators competed before a multitude of tribal people from across the peninsula in annual literary markets like SuqUkaz, Suq Majanna and SuqDhi al-Majaz. Speech in this context was not purely for entertainment, it was a means of diplomacy, it was a way of settling differences, it was a way of asserting tribal honour.

This oral tradition was transformed by the coming of Islam. The Quran addressed itself to an audience already attuned to the music of Arabic speech, and it did so in a language whose rhythm and imagery surpassed anything the desert had heard. The Quranic challenge – “*Fa’tu bi-suratin min mithlihi*” – “Then produce a surah like it” (Quran 2:23) – is itself a literary challenge, and the inability of the most skilled Arab orators to meet it lies at the heart of the doctrine of *i’jaz al-Qur’an*, the doctrine of Quranic inimitability.

Two further Quranic passages reinforce the dignity of the spoken and written word. In Surah al-Qalam, the Almighty swears by the instrument of writing itself: “*Nun, wa al-qalamiwa ma yasturun*” – “Nun. By the pen and that which they inscribe” (Quran 68:1). And in Surah al-‘Alaq, among the earliest verses revealed to the Prophet (peace be upon him), the Lord proclaims: “*Alladhi’allama bi-l-qalam, ‘allama al-insana ma lam ya’lam*” – “Who taught by the pen, taught man that which he did not know” (Quran 96:4–5). In the Islamic understanding, the pen is no neutral instrument but a sanctified means by which knowledge is transmitted from one generation to the next.

The religious statements entailed the orator and the scribe being in a state of moral responsibility. Public oratory involved a trust, and a letter in writing a power of communication over remote minds. These beliefs gave rise to a highly elevated style which distinguishes early Arabic prose from ordinary speech. Means became something the orator and secretary had to guard.

## 3. The Khutba: Definition, Form and Function

The Arabic word *khutba* derives from the trilateral root *kh-t-b*, which carries the sense of formal address and serious speech. Technically, the khutba is a structured oration delivered before an assembled audience, generally in standing posture, with an opening invocation (*hamdala*) and a clear rhetorical purpose. Classical scholars of rhetoric, most notably al-Jahiz (d. 255/869) in *al-Bayan wa al-Tabyin* and Abu Hilal al-Askari (d. ca. 395/1005) in *Kitab al-Sina’atayn*, classified khutbas according to occasion: religious khutbas of the Friday gathering and the two Eids; political khutbas delivered upon the assumption of office; military khutbas to rally troops before battle; nuptial khutbas at marriages; and funeral khutbas in praise of the departed.

Several features mark the khutba as a distinct literary form. It is composed first for the ear and only secondarily for the eye, and so it leans heavily upon devices that please the listener: rhythmic prose (*saj’*), parallelism (*muwazana*), strategic repetition, antithesis

(*tibaq*), and short, punctuated sentences that resound in the open air. The opening was almost always a praise of Allah and a salutation upon His Prophet, after which the orator passed into the body of the address. The closing typically returned to invocation and prayer, framing the entire speech within a religious envelope.

The khutba was also in its own right a literary act, as well as a formal one. It used its words carefully, it looked for beautiful phrases, it was aiming for a moral impact on the viewers. These speeches were not spontaneous, nor were they improvised; they were, when time permitted, carefully and deliberately prepared, even though not written at the time and even when spoken from memory. According to al-Muqaddima, oratory was among the Arabs an occupation of which the secret was long preparation and the apparent spontaneity.

#### **4. Khutbas of the Jahili Period**

Among the most celebrated of the pre-Islamic orators was Quss ibn Sa'ida al-Iyadi, bishop of Najran, whose sermons at SuqUkaz are preserved in fragments by later compilers. He is reported to have proclaimed, mounted upon a camel before a vast crowd: "O people, gather, listen, and remember. He who lives, dies; he who dies, is gone; and all that is to come, shall come." The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), as related in the works of Ibn Kathir and al-Bayhaqi, recalled in later years having heard Quss in his youth and praised the orator's eloquence.

Other notable figures of the period include Aktham ibn Sayfi, sage of the Banu Tamim, whose terse aphorisms became proverbial across Arabia, and Hani ibn Qabisa al-Shaybani, who rallied his tribesmen at the battle of DhiQar. These early khatibs established the conventions that later orators would inherit: the standing posture, the holding of a staff or bow as a prop, the rhythmic close, and the moral aphorism as a structural pillar of the address.

#### **5. Prophetic and Caliphal Khutbas**

Islam provided the most important models of Arabic speech. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) gave many Khutbas, some of which are very well known, including the Khutbat al-Wada' (the Farewell Sermon) that he gave on the plain of Arafat during the 10th year after the Hijra. This sermon is recorded in the long hadith of Jabir ibn Abdullah in Sahih Muslim (Kitab al-Hajj, Hadith 1218) and other primary sources, which included the inviolability of human life, property and honour, the cessation of blood feuds and usury, the rights of women in the family, and the equality of all believers in race and family origin.

The rhetoric of the Farewell Sermon is impressive! The main doctrinal statements are in short, declarative sentences. The address is held together by a refrain pattern: Verily your blood, your property and your honour are sacred unto you... The closing call to those who were present to pass on the message to those who were not there meant that the speech had an open-ended communicative life: each hearer was a future transmitter. This is, in literary terms, an extraordinary device, because it makes the audience itself continue the text.

This prophetic tradition was carried on and developed by the Rightly-Guided Caliphs. The first khutba of Abu Bakr al-Siddiq upon his assumption of the leadership was to "correct him if he makes a mistake" and "listen to him but not obey him if he deviates" which established a tradition of accountability for the khutba that became a characteristic of Islamic political speech. The sermons of Umar ibn al-Khattab were direct and had a moral tone; and Uthman ibn Affan is remembered for the weightiness of his advice in the years of increasing political tension. It is, however, in the khutbas of Ali ibn Abi Talib (may Allah be pleased with him) that early Arabic oratory attains its classical summit. His sermons, gathered some three centuries later by al-Sharif al-Radi (d. 406/1015) in *Nahj al-*

*Balagha* (The Peak of Eloquence), display a remarkable combination of theological depth, ethical weight and lyrical phrasing. His sermon describing the marvels of the peacock, his oration upon the qualities of the God-fearing known as *Khutbat al-Muttaqin*, and his magisterial epistle to his governor Malik al-Ashtar are studied to the present day in the curricula of Arabic rhetoric. The seventh-century commentator Ibn Abi al-Hadid devoted a multi-volume *Sharh* to *Nahj al-Balagha*, a fact which indicates the seminal place of the work in the history of Arabic stylistics.

### 6. Khutbas of the Umayyad Era

The Umayyad period saw the khutba pressed into service as an instrument of state. Ziyad ibn Abih, governor of Basra under Mu'awiya, delivered the famous *Khutba al-Batra'* – the “truncated sermon,” so called because it omitted the conventional opening praise – upon entering an unruly Basra. His pointed warnings, his appeal to collective discipline, and his use of measured threat against open rebellion made the address a model of severe political rhetoric for centuries afterwards.

Al-Hajjaj ibn Yusuf al-Thaqafi (d. 95/714) provides perhaps the most arresting example of this tendency. Al-Jahiz recorded his first address to al-Kufa in the book *al-Bayan wa al-Tabyin*, which begins with the famous verse, “I see heads that are ripe and ready for the harvest and I am the harvester.” The reader cannot refrain from admiring his style, which is so rich in images, so balanced in rhythm, so steady and soaring that it is one of the most commented-on orations in the language, whatever opinions may be held about his politics. His khutba offers an illustration of the rhetorical skill that can be used to the extent of power as well as principle, something which did not go unnoticed by medieval critics. This state sponsored “eloquence”, was complemented by the Khariji orators. They preached with ascetic urgency and a prophetic moral sense in their khutbas, which were typically given just before a battle. They demonstrated that the khutba could serve dissent as effectively as it served authority, and they enriched the genre with a register of voluntary martyrdom that no later orator could quite reproduce.

### 7. The Letter (Risala): Origins and Early Evolution

If the khutba was the literature of the voice, the risala was the literature of the pen. The Arabic word *risala* denotes a written communication, and the genre embraced both personal correspondence (called *al-rasa'il al-ikhwaniyyat*) and official documents of state (called *al-rasa'il al-diwaniyyat*). The earliest specimens of distinctively Islamic letter-writing are religious and political in character: the letters which the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) addressed to the kings and rulers of his age.

In the sixth and seventh years after the Hijra, the Prophet dispatched envoys carrying letters to Heraclius, Emperor of the Byzantines; to Khusraw Parviz, the Sasanian monarch; to the Negus of Abyssinia; to al-Muqawqis of Egypt; and to several Arab chiefs. The episode of the letter to Heraclius is preserved in *Sahih al-Bukhari* (Kitab Bad' al-Wahy, Hadith 7), in the long narration of Abu Sufyan ibn Harb. These letters were models of concise, dignified, religiously framed communication. Each opened with the *basmala*, named the sender and the addressee, conveyed the call to Islam, and closed with a citation from the Quran. The brevity and clarity of the prophetic letters established a register that subsequent secretaries would amplify and adorn but never abandon.

As the Islamic state expanded under the Rashidun and then under the Umayyads, the bureaucratic apparatus required ever more sophisticated written communication. The *diwan al-rasa'il* – the chancery of correspondence – emerged as a specialized department dedicated to drafting state documents. Within its walls the risala matured from a brief functional note into a fully developed literary form, governed by its own conventions of opening, transition and close.

## 8. The Flowering of Epistolography

The transformation of the letter into high literature is associated above all with the name of Abd al-Hamid al-Katib (d. 132/750), secretary to the last Umayyad caliph Marwan II. His *Risala ila al-Kuttab* – his Letter to the Secretaries – laid out the moral and stylistic ideals of the chancery profession and is widely regarded as the founding document of artistic Arabic prose. The Arabic literary tradition has preserved the saying, “Prose began with Abd al-Hamid and ended with Ibn al-Amid,” a tribute to his foundational role. He introduced into chancery practice elaborate openings, balanced clauses, the judicious deployment of *saj'*, and the well-placed citation of Quran and proverb.

A near contemporary, Abdullah ibn al-Muqaffa' (d. 142/759), brought to Arabic prose the storytelling treasures of Persia and India. His rendering of *Kalila waDimna* and his original works *al-Adab al-Kabir* and *al-Adab al-Saghir* grafted onto Arabic letters a literary intelligence drawn from Pahlavi sources, while remaining within the rhetorical norms that Abd al-Hamid had codified. Ibn al-Muqaffa's prose is plainer than that of Abd al-Hamid, but no less artful in its economy of expression.

The Abbasid period witnessed the further refinement of the risala. Al-Jahiz (d. 255/869) employed the epistolary form as a vehicle for theological, social and even zoological inquiry, producing such works as *Risalat al-Tarbi'wa al-Tadwir*, *Risalat al-Qiyan*, and the monumental *al-Bayan wa al-Tabyin*, in which he both theorized about eloquence and exemplified it in practice. Ibn al-Amid (d. 360/970), vizier to the Buyids, gave to the chancery letter a richness of texture that became the new standard for several generations. Centuries later the tradition culminated in the encyclopedic labour of al-Qalqashandi (d. 821/1418), whose *Subh al-A'sha fi Sina'at al-Insha*, a fourteen-volume manual, gathered the cumulative wisdom of nine centuries of Arabic epistolography.

## 9. Literary Justifications: The Specific Contributions

Having traced the historical trajectory of the khutba and the risala, it remains to identify the precise contributions these genres made to the wider growth of Arabic literature. Five contributions deserve particular notice.

First, the khutba and the risala established the canons of *balagha*. The Arabic science of rhetoric grew out of the analysis of khutbas, letters and Quranic style. When scholars such as Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani (d. 471/1078) in *Asrar al-Balagha* and *Dala'il al-I'jaz*, and later al-Sakkaki (d. 626/1229) in *Miftah al-'Ulum*, systematized the disciplines of *'ilm al-ma'ani*, *'ilm al-bayan* and *'ilm al-badi'*, they drew their illustrative material chiefly from the early khutbas and *rasa'il*. Without this corpus of primary texts, the theoretical edifice of *balagha* would have lacked its foundation.

Second, the two genres shaped Arabic stylistics in ways that are still felt. The khutba contributed the device of *saj'* – rhymed and rhythmic prose – which became a hallmark of high literary writing across many sub-genres. It also taught Arabic authors the art of the periodic sentence, the cadence of parallel clauses, and the power of the closing aphorism. The risala, for its part, refined the art of the opening, the transition and the close, and introduced the elaborate metaphorical openings that would later flower into the genre of the *maqama*.

Third, the khutba and the risala enriched the Arabic lexicon. The themes addressed by orators – mortality, eschatology, governance, justice, exhortation – demanded precise vocabulary, and orators either coined or popularized terms that became standard. The chancery letter, dealing as it did with diplomacy, taxation and administration, similarly enlarged the technical vocabulary of the language to meet the needs of an expanding civilization.

Fourth, the two genres preserved historical and religious memory. The compilations of khutbas – beginning with *Nahj al-Balagha* and continuing through al-Jahiz's *al-Bayan wa al-Tabyin* and Ibn Qutayba's *Uyun al-Akhbar* – became repositories of communal memory in which the voice of the early community could still be heard. The gathering of state letters in works such as *Subh al-A'sha* performed the same task for the political and administrative tradition.

Fifth, and perhaps most consequentially, these genres generated new literary forms. The *maqamat* of Badi' al-Zaman al-Hamadani (d. 398/1008) and al-Hariri (d. 516/1122) emerged from the marriage of khutba-style rhythmic prose with epistolary structure. The *adab* anthologies of al-Mubarrad, Ibn Qutayba and Ibn Abd Rabbih would have been unthinkable without the rich corpus of khutbas and letters from which they drew their material.

The hadith literature also bears witness to the seriousness with which the early community regarded eloquent speech and writing. The Prophet (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: “*Man kana yu'minu bi-Llahiwa al-yawmi al-akhiri, fal-yaqulkhayran aw li-yasmut*” – “Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day, let him say what is good or remain silent” (Sahih al-Bukhari, Kitab al-Adab, Hadith 6018; Sahih Muslim, Kitab al-Iman, Hadith 47). The injunction is primarily ethical, but it also recognizes the public weight of speech and inscribes a religious responsibility upon the orator and the secretary alike.

## 10. Conclusion

The growth of Arabic literature cannot be understood through the lens of poetry alone. Prose, in its twin forms of khutba and risala, provided the structures within which Arabic eloquence matured into a disciplined art. The khutba gave to the language a public moral voice, a rhythmic register suited to the gathered congregation, and a vocabulary of governance and exhortation. The risala gave to it the disciplines of measured composition, the courtesies of formal address, and the elaborate rhetorical architecture that would distinguish high Arabic prose from ordinary speech.

The Quranic affirmation of *bayan*, the prophetic example of measured and effective speech, and the rich corpus of early khutbas and *rasa'il* together created the conditions within which Arabic prose became one of the great literary languages of human history. To trace this growth is to trace a continuous line from the orators of Ukaz to the secretaries of Baghdad, and from the Farewell Sermon upon the plain of Arafat to the elaborate state letters compiled by al-Qalqashandi. The line is not always a straight one, but its overall trajectory is unmistakable: from voice to pen, from tribal pride to imperial chancery, from improvised eloquence to fully theorized art.

In recognizing this trajectory, the modern student of Arabic literature affirms a truth that the early masters themselves understood: that the word, whether spoken from the *minbar* or inscribed upon parchment, is among the noblest of human accomplishments, and that its cultivation has been one of the central tasks of the Arabic literary tradition. The khutba and the risala did not merely accompany the rise of that tradition; in a real sense, they made it possible.

## References

1. The Holy Qur'an. Surah al-Rahman (55:1–4); Surah al-Baqara (2:23); Surah al-Qalam (68:1); Surah al-'Alaq (96:4–5).
2. Al-Bukhari, Muhammad ibn Isma'il. Sahih al-Bukhari. Riyadh: Dar al-Salam, 1997. (References: Hadith 7, Kitab Bad' al-Wahy; Hadith 5146, Kitab al-Nikah; Hadith 6018, Kitab al-Adab.)

3. Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj al-Naysaburi. *Sahih Muslim*. Riyadh: Dar al-Salam, 2000. (References: Hadith 47, Kitab al-Iman; Hadith 1218, Kitab al-Hajj.)
4. Al-Sharif al-Radi. *Nahj al-Balagha*. Edited by Subhi al-Salih. Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Lubnani, 1967.
5. Al-Jahiz, Abu Uthman Amr ibn Bahr. *Al-Bayan wa al-Tabyin*. Edited by Abd al-Salam Muhammad Harun. Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanji, 1985.
6. Abu Hilal al-Askari. *Kitab al-Sina'atayn: al-Kitabawa al-Shi'r*. Edited by Ali Muhammad al-Bajawi and Muhammad Abu al-Fadl Ibrahim. Cairo: Isa al-Babi al-Halabi, 1971.
7. Al-Jurjani, Abd al-Qahir. *Asrar al-Balagha*. Edited by Mahmud Muhammad Shakir. Jeddah: Dar al-Madani, 1991.
8. Al-Qalqashandi, Ahmad ibn Ali. *Subh al-A'sha fi Sina'at al-Insha*. Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Misriyya, 1922.
9. Ibn Khaldun, Abd al-Rahman. *Al-Muqaddima*. Translated by Franz Rosenthal. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967.
10. Dayf, Shawqi. *Tarikh al-Adab al-Arabi: al-'Asr al-Jahili and al-'Asr al-Islami*. Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, multiple editions.
11. Al-Fakhuri, Hanna. *Al-Jami' fi Tarikh al-Adab al-'Arabi*. Beirut: Dar al-Jil, 1986.
12. Nicholson, Reynold A. *A Literary History of the Arabs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907 (reprinted).
13. Brockelmann, Carl. *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1937–1949.
14. Gibb, H. A. R. *Arabic Literature: An Introduction*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963.
15. Latham, J. D. "The Beginnings of Arabic Prose Literature: The Epistolary Genre," in *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*, ed. A. F. L. Beeston et al. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.