

Aesthetics of Artistic Construction and Argumentation in Abbasid Administrative Letters (The “Thursday Letter” of Ahmad ibn Yusuf regarding the Pledge of Allegiance to Al-Ma’mun as a Model)

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Abstract:

The art of administrative (official) letters emerged from the Umayyad era to the Abbasid era, and it moved from brevity and simplicity of expression to complexity, artistic embellishment, and digression, as these letters became a political and administrative means reflecting the prestige of the state and the authority of the caliph.

Administrative letters developed and evolved during the Abbasid era in both quantity and quality, and many skilled writers emerged who immortalized this art through elegant and eloquent models. Among the most prominent of these refined models is the (Thursday) letter by Abu Ja’far Ahmad ibn Yusuf, the writer of the Abbasid Caliph Al-Ma’mun, in his call to the people of Khorasan to pledge allegiance to Al-Ma’mun.

I found that this letter represents the peak of splendor and eloquence reached by the art of letters during the Abbasid era, in terms of linguistic quality, selection of vocabulary, good formulation, precision of meanings, beauty of imagery, and strength of argumentation and persuasion... In this research, I aimed to reveal the aesthetics of the artistic construction of this letter by relying on the descriptive-analytical method, attempting to answer an important question: What are the rules and regulations of the art of letter writing? And what are the features and characteristics of this art through the Thursday letter of Ahmad ibn Yusuf?

Keywords: The art of letter writing – administrative letter and its regulations – Thursday letter – Ahmad ibn Yusuf the writer – argumentation and persuasion – artistic construction

Introduction:

Abbasid literature is considered a bright page in the history of ancient Arabic literature. It is rich, fertile, and diverse literature, as it witnessed a comprehensive renewal in themes, content, and artistic forms. Abbasid literature was influenced by civilizational prosperity, supported by cultural mixing with non-Arab peoples, and the flourishing of translation movements encouraged by the caliphs, which led to the formation of a rich literature characterized by eloquence of expression, simplicity of language, depth of meaning, richness of imagination, inclination toward argumentation, rational thinking, and vast knowledge. During this period,

artistic prose developed in an unprecedented way. Among the distinguished prose arts that clearly emerged is the art of letter writing.

When speaking about the art of letter writing, we must return to the early Islamic period to point out an important aspect that directly contributed to the emergence and development of this art in our ancient literature. This refers to the role of the Qur'an—with all its rhetorical and stylistic weight—in encouraging and developing prose literary arts, since the Qur'an was revealed in prose, and the Arabs were amazed by it and admired its eloquence. It is the miraculous Book of God in both wording and meaning, and God challenged the eloquent Arabs with it, as He said: "Say, if mankind and jinn gathered together to produce the like of this Qur'an, they could not produce its like..." Therefore, the Qur'an influenced Arabic speech and literature through its styles, expressions, and imagery.

One of the main factors in the development of letter writing during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods was its emergence under rulers and caliphs, as it served as an essential means of communication between caliphs and governors, and between caliphs and the kings of non-Arab nations. Great attention was given to establishing a special and independent bureau for official administrative correspondence, and caliphs appointed the most skilled writers in these bureaus. Based on the above, I chose the art of letter writing in one of the most flourishing periods of Arabic literature, the Abbasid era. I will attempt to trace the development of this prominent art, its main artistic features, and the most important factors influencing its development and spread, along with analyzing an important administrative letter from the time of the Abbasid Caliph Abdullah Al-Ma'mun, written by his well-known secretary Abu Ja'far Ahmad ibn Yusuf, known as the Thursday Letter. Based on the above: What is meant by the art of letter writing in ancient Arabic literature? What are its types? What are its rules and conditions? And what are the manifestations of artistic construction in the Thursday Letter of Abu Ja'far Ahmad ibn Yusuf?

1- The concept of the art of letter writing in Arabic literature and its regulations:

A/ Linguistic meaning of the letter:

The letter in language comes from correspondence and writing from a first party called the sender to a second party called the receiver. Qudama ibn Ja'far said: "Correspondence (tarassul) comes from 'I corresponded,' and I am a sender... and the noun is letter (risala) or correspondence... and all of this refers to speech sent to someone far away or absent. Thus, the name tarassul and risala is derived from this." And consider the verse: "As We sent among you a Messenger from yourselves..." meaning We sent a messenger who recites God's verses to you... In language, people say they corresponded when they sent a message or messenger to one another, and a camel is called marsal when it is easy in movement.

B/ Terminological meaning of the letter:

In the art of letter writing, it is considered an ancient literary prose art. The Arabs knew it since the pre-Islamic era, although it did not appear as prominently as poetry. A letter is a prose piece that may be long or short depending on the author's intention and purpose, and it may include poetry when necessary. It developed under rulers and kings in their official correspondence with other kings, rulers, and military leaders. Among them are administrative or official letters

issued by governmental bureaus dealing with state and political affairs, where accuracy and formal conventions are observed. This includes treaties, pledges, proclamations, conquests, calls for obedience, and encouragement for jihad.

These letters address many topics depending on necessity, including state administration matters, as well as greetings, condolences, and thanks. Writers excelled in crafting introductions and openings in an artistic style, and therefore the most eloquent writers were chosen for such letters, as they represented the state and the voice of the ruler. Any ambiguity or error was not acceptable.

Bureaus increased during the Abbasid era, leading to the refinement and flourishing of administrative writing, especially in the second Abbasid period, due to many factors, the most important being the mixing of Arabs with non-Arabs and benefiting from their sciences and cultures.

C/ Regulations and types of letter writing:

Letters have rules and regulations agreed upon by practitioners of this craft, as mentioned by Abu al-Abbas al-Qalqashandi:

- The writer must begin with a good opening that attracts attention.
- He must include an introduction in important correspondence.
- He must distinguish between expressions used in correspondence and place each in its proper position.
- He must know where to use supplication in letters.
- He must use appropriate titles for the recipient.
- He must consider the purpose of the correspondence.
- He must understand the level of comprehension of each audience.

One important element in administrative letter writing is “tawqi‘at” (annotations), which means commenting on incoming letters with appropriate responses supported by Qur’anic verses, wisdom sayings, or the writer’s own expression. This was known among the Persians before Islam.

Among types of letters are administrative letters, brotherly letters (friendship correspondence), and literary letters characterized by expressive language that stirs emotions and conveys ideas artistically.

2- The emergence and development of letter writing in Arabic literature:

Letter writing is an ancient prose art in Arabic literature, rooted deep in history. Arabs knew it since the pre-Islamic era, though poetry was more prominent. They used letters when necessary, especially in trade, treaties, alliances, peace agreements, and commerce.

Then it developed in the early Islamic period, supported by the Qur’an and the Sunnah and the need to spread Islam. The Prophet Muhammad sent letters to kings and rulers inviting them to Islam.

Then it developed further in the Umayyad period due to political transformations and the establishment of dynastic rule, with political and sectarian conflicts shaping literature. This led to the establishment of official bureaus for correspondence, especially under Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan.

After the fall of the Umayyads and the rise of the Abbasids, letter writing entered a new phase influenced by foreign cultures such as Persian, Turkish, Roman, Indian, and Greek civilizations. Abbasid caliphs maintained and developed the bureau system, and famous writers emerged such as Ibrahim ibn al-Abbas al-Suli, Ibn al-Muqaffa, and Ibn al-'Amid.

We should not forget in this context the development of the art of fraternal correspondence letters, whose authors were concerned with themes of friendship, love, apology, complaint... and others. These are letters exchanged between friends, companions, and lovers, and they are letters that arise from individual and subjective feelings, "in which there is fear, awe, desire, praise, satire, congratulations, reproach, apology, supplication, and condolence, and thus they competed with poetry in its fields," and they were artistic letters in which Abbasid writers displayed their literary and rhetorical skills, presenting beautiful expressive models and exquisite poetic images.

3- Aesthetics of artistic construction in the letter of Abu Ja'far Ahmad ibn Yusuf regarding the pledge of allegiance to Caliph al-Ma'mun:

Biography of Abu Ja'far Ahmad ibn Yusuf:

He is the writer Abu Ja'far Ahmad ibn Yusuf ibn al-Qasim ibn Subayh, a client of the sons of 'Ajl. His grandfather Subayh was a Copt from Egypt. He was an Abbasid scribe who grew up in an ancient family rooted in epistolary writing and composition, for his father and grandfather were scribes in the Abbasid court. It appears that his father educated him and did so well, so he grew up well-versed in the Book of God, familiar with the teachings of the noble Sharia, especially those related to personal status and transactions, in addition to the craft of writing and courtly literature.

The first emergence of the writer Ahmad ibn Yusuf was after the killing of Caliph al-Amin, when Tahir ibn al-Husayn asked the scribes to write to al-Ma'mun, and they wrote at length, which Tahir did not approve of. When Ahmad ibn Yusuf wrote, he fulfilled exactly what was required. From that moment his reputation began to rise and his fame to spread due to his mastery of a precise subject in which excellence is difficult. Through this style he gained favor with Tahir ibn al-Husayn, one of al-Ma'mun's greatest commanders, and he became famous for his long letter called "al-Khamis" (The Thursday Letter), which he wrote for al-Ma'mun. It was read in Khurasan to the Shi'a of the Abbasids. It was the custom of the Abbasid caliphs to entrust the most eloquent writer with composing a persuasive letter to the people to support the Abbasid cause in general, to demonstrate the legitimacy of the Abbasids' right to the caliphate, and to praise the merits of the Abbasid caliph. The Letter of al-Khamis was read to the supporters of al-Ma'mun in Khurasan, and Ahmad ibn Yusuf read it to the Shi'a and supporters of al-Ma'mun in Khurasan, in order to unite people in love for Caliph al-Ma'mun.

Content of the Letter of al-Khamis regarding the pledge of allegiance to al-Ma'mun by Ahmad ibn Yusuf:

"From Abdullah, Imam al-Ma'mun, Commander of the Faithful, to those who have pledged allegiance upon truth and who support the religion, from the people of Khurasan and other Muslims:

Peace be upon you. The Commander of the Faithful praises to you God, there is no god but He, and asks Him to bless Muhammad, His servant and Messenger. To proceed: Praise be to God, the Powerful, the Subduer, the Originator, the Inheritor, the Possessor of might and authority, light and proof, the Creator of the heavens and the earth and what is between them, who precedes with favor and grace upon their people before their entitlement to His reward by preserving the laws of His obedience, who made what He deposited in His servants of His blessing a guiding proof leading them to His knowledge, through what He granted them of intellects by which they understand decisive speech...

Then among the great blessings of God upon His creation is His care for them, then He guides them and directs them to their benefits, protects them from their harms, and guides them to what contains their righteousness, and encourages them to adhere to the religion of God which He made a protection for them. Were it not for His prior care and His rectification of them by His mercy, they would have been destroyed due to their inability to manage their sustenance and livelihoods, and they would have perished through the aggression of some of them against others, and the transgression of their strong against their weak. But He sent to them His prophets and messengers, bearing good tidings and warnings with signs that cannot be attained by created hands, so they accepted what was apportioned among them and refrained from mutual aggression and injustice...

And the messengers of God, the Almighty, continued to come to His creation one after another with radiant light and decisive proof, finding no repelling or rejection of the truth imposed upon them except stubbornness and denial, as God Almighty said: "And We certainly sent before you messengers to their peoples, and they came to them with clear proofs, so We took retribution from those who committed crimes, and it was Our duty to support the believers." So the deniers found no way to repel what was established against them of binding proof except hostility and rejection. The prophets of God, peace be upon them, were sent across ages as warners to nations until God Almighty sealed them with the unlettered Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. He sent him alone, without supporter or helper, to a people who worshipped mute idols and silent stones. The people among whom he was sent denied him at the first moment of his call, and the kings of regions plotted against him, mobilizing armies and weapons, setting traps and conspiracies, while he called to the path of his Lord as God commanded him, saying: "Call to the path of your Lord with wisdom and good exhortation and argue with them in the best manner."

Then he struggled with those who obeyed him and those who disobeyed him, until God exalted His word, manifested His call, and completed for His servants their religion which He chose for them. When God chose for him what is with Him and singled him out for what is with Him of eternal bliss and noble reward after the establishment of religion and people entering it in multitudes, He left after him—when He sealed prophethood with him—the righteous noble successors from his close kin and lineage, to establish the prescribed laws, implement God's revealed rulings, follow the transmitted Sunnah, preserve it in his kinship, in those who responded to his call, and to complete what was obligated for him of virtue and nearness, and

to fulfill what was promised to him of manifesting the religion with which he was sent, which He chose and approved.

And the selection of people of virtue from his family and clan for inheritance of his caliphate was among the great means of nearness which God's prophets sought, as mentioned in the revelation. God the Blessed and Exalted singled out His Prophet, peace be upon him, by commanding him to ask his nation to make affection for his kin, as a reward for those who followed him in the message and were guided from misguidance. Their virtue was a firm decree from God Almighty, not by request of the Messenger of God, peace be upon him, and He obligated its conveyance to His creation. So He said: "Say: I ask of you no reward for it except love for the near relatives." And He indicated through what He informed and revealed of their purification and removal of impurity from them that He has chosen them, as He said: "God only wishes to remove impurity from you, O People of the House, and to purify you completely." And among what established for them the right of inheritance in His decisive revelation is His saying: "And those of kinship are more entitled to one another in the Book of God." Then He joined obedience to them with obedience to Him, saying: "Obey God and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you..."

Let the first thing you undertake and persist in among your good conduct be fairness among yourselves, giving precedence to people of virtue and praiseworthy deeds among you, and honoring their matter...

And the Commander of the Faithful sees the inheritance of wisdom and trust as a tradition in his morals which he preserves and maintains, just as he sees inheritance of property as an obligatory duty. And the Commander of the Faithful—with what has preceded—has full confidence in God's protection of his caliphate, which He made an honor for His religion and a foundation for His creation...

And maintain, O community of Muslims, the abundant blessing with praise of its Bestower... and you see what you were in before it and what became of those who lost it... then regret follows when no return is possible...

The Commander of the Faithful wished to address you with an exhortation that awakens you to your share, strengthens your insight, and cuts off the ambition of Satan and his party among you, for what is required of him in guiding you. And the Commander of the Faithful asks God, who guided to supplication out of grace and guaranteed response, as He said: "Call upon Me, I will respond to you," to unite your hearts upon His satisfaction, to bind your rope upon obedience, to grant you the best of His favors, to distribute among you His gratitude, to protect you from the plots of disbelievers and the envy of aggressors, and to preserve the Commander of the Faithful among you with the best of what He preserved His allies and party. And by God the Commander of the Faithful seeks assistance for what he intends of rewarding you with goodness and leading you to the best path. And in Him he finds satisfaction as supporter and guardian. Sufficient is God as guardian, and sufficient is God as helper. And peace be upon you, and the mercy of God and His blessings."

Aesthetics of artistic construction of the letter:

A- Structure of introductions:

The writer Ahmad ibn Yusuf maintained the pattern of administrative letters based on a functional opening that reveals the identity of the letter and the correspondents by mentioning sender and recipient, then opening with greeting, peace, and prayers upon the Prophet, then praise and glorification of God Almighty as in his statement: "From Abdullah, Imam al-Ma'mun, Commander of the Faithful... Peace be upon you... To proceed: Praise be to God, the Powerful, the Subduer..." He expanded in praising God and describing His greatness and power with stylistic embellishment marked by saj' and paronomasia, as in: "the Powerful, the Subduer, the Originator, the Inheritor..." The verbal ornamentation and artificial stylistic elaboration in the introduction is a common feature of administrative correspondence. Beautifying openings with rhetorical devices, imagery, expressive structures, and appropriate quotations is evident in this artistic letter. For example, paronomasia in "the Powerful, the Subduer," synonymy in "might and authority," and saj' between "might and authority" and "light and proof." He also embellished the introduction with imagery such as "to those who have pledged allegiance upon truth," which is a metaphor.

The writer also tended toward argumentation and persuasion, since he is in a position of debate seeking to win hearts and minds and establish the concept of caliphate and allegiance, so he frequently uses Qur'anic evidence as well as rational argumentation.

B- Structure of content:

The transition in Abbasid administrative letters from introduction to subject is made with the known formula "to proceed," but in this letter the writer did not explicitly state the main purpose; rather, he remained in describing the greatness of God with rhymed expressions drawn from religious text. The aim was to establish proof for the Shi'a of al-Ma'mun that truth is what God has established, not what matches desires. The writer prepares for the main objective, which is proving the legitimacy of the Abbasids' right to the caliphate and thus the priority of al-Ma'mun, since God inherited them authority due to their noble lineage.

He relied heavily on religious argumentation, Qur'anic citation, intertextuality, rhetorical persuasion, and stylistic ornamentation such as antithesis and metaphor. The purpose was to affirm that obedience to the Abbasids is obedience to the Prophet and to God.

He also used rhetorical devices such as rhythmical prose, antithesis (obedience/disobedience), and metaphorical imagery such as "God exalted His word and manifested His call," where abstract meanings are embodied in sensory form.

Since the writer addressed the people of Khurasan, supporters and Shi'a of al-Ma'mun, he praised them and preferred them, saying: "You are more worthy of good obedience and swift response..." and he concluded with supplication for them, asking God to unite them upon obedience, protect them, and preserve the Commander of the Faithful among them. This reflects the political rhetorical style aimed at winning loyalty and support through persuasion and emotional appeal.

We observe in the writer's style two patterns of writing: sometimes the style is direct, explicit, and rhetorical in many contexts, especially in persuasion; and at other times it is highly ornate, employing extensive rhetorical embellishment and figurative imagery.

We also observe, in terms of meanings and content, that they revolve around two main axes: political issues related to the caliphate and the pledge of allegiance to the Caliph Al-Ma'mun, and a religious, moral, and exhortative theme, which is secondary and serves the primary political theme within the framework of argumentation and persuasion.

C. Structure of the Conclusions

What has been said about the introductions and content also applies to the conclusion. The end of the letter comes in the form of a supplication for the improvement of conditions and the rectification of affairs, as well as a set of directives and advice, as in his statement:

"...and may the Commander of the Faithful be preserved among you with the best of what He has preserved for His allies and His followers. And by God, the Commander of the Faithful seeks assistance in what he intends of rewarding you with goodness and guiding you to the best path, and in Him he finds satisfaction as supporter and guardian. Sufficient is God as Guardian, and sufficient is God as Helper. Peace, mercy, and blessings of God be upon you."

In this concluding supplication, there is an affirmation of the value of the Caliph Al-Ma'mun, placing him in a high and elevated rank by associating him with the righteous, the chosen, and the pious. The writer also shows the Caliph's need to seek help from God and to be guided by Him, as a form of religiosity and humility that in fact elevates the Caliph and increases his stature. The letter ends with the greeting of peace, which is the adornment of Muslims and simultaneously the opening and closing key of speech.

The style is direct and straightforward, almost devoid of rhetorical ornamentation, for the purpose of affirmation and supplication that God may grant success to the Caliph and rectify through him the affairs of the community. However, the discourse is not free from implicit argumentation and debate, as the Caliph is compared to the righteous and the saints, and it is emphasized that the Commander of the Faithful has no power or strength of his own, but rather derives his strength from God and His guidance. This serves to demonstrate the strength of the Caliph's faith and piety, and to deny him arrogance or tyranny, thereby presenting him as a legitimate ruler chosen by God for His servants.

Conclusion

In the conclusion of my research, I reached a set of important findings, the most prominent of which are the following:

- Classical Arabic prose developed and evolved just like poetry, and the main reason for the development of Arabic prose is the Qur'an with its eloquent and miraculous style, as Arab writers sought to imitate its style.
- One of the most prominent prose genres that emerged and flourished after the Prophetic mission, especially during the Abbasid era, is the epistolary art, supported by caliphs and princes, due to official correspondence between caliphs, governors, and others. For this purpose, caliphs established a specific administrative institution concerned with official correspondence, known as the Diwan.
- Caliphs and rulers selected the most distinguished, skilled, and eloquent writers for the Diwan, and they underwent training before being appointed.

- The art of letter writing, especially official (diwan) correspondence, has rules and standards that must be respected in both form and content. These include mentioning the sender and their status, the recipient and their rank, opening with greetings and peace, and then moving to the main subject, etc.
- The “Thursday Letter” by Abu Ja‘far Ahmad ibn Yusuf to the people of Khurasan regarding the pledge of allegiance to the Abbasid Caliph Al-Ma’mun is one of the most eloquent and refined administrative letters. In it, the writer demonstrated remarkable rhetorical skill, exceptional precision in selecting meanings, excellence in employing imagery, strong use of quotations, and notable intelligence and subtlety in argumentation and reasoning.

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