

The Well-Tempered Reader: The Legitimization of Adab in the Arabic Literary Tradition

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Sarah R. Bin Tyeer’s book, *The Well-Tempered Reader: The Legitimization of Adab in the Arabic Literary Tradition*, is one of the recent contributions to the expanding field of adab studies. The concept of adab, also used in plural form *ādāb*, denotes ethical and intellectual refinement and learning. Adab encapsulates virtue-ethics and values education that characterize the cultivated human being. Thus, in this sense, adab, as Tyeer argues, is an institution that informs the legitimate praxis of the human character. Adab is the performance of “the ideal way of being human” (*murū’a*). Tyeer, however, cautions that adab is not a “theoretical abstraction”, an abstract ethics that is imposed on and blindly observed by the individual. It is, on the contrary, a historically conditioned “ethical fountain” and an intellectual repository that constitutes the human subject from within. The subject, in turn, actively cultivates this repository and utilizes its tools in their social performance of adab. In this sense, Tyeer shows, adab encapsulates the ways of being connected to a social group, an epistemic community that is built around a shared intellectual framework. Thus, Tyeer argues for the individual’s investment and thrust in the institution of adab as the means of enhancing their social standing and their access to the epistemic community. In this sense, the author points to the relationship between adab and power, power in the Foucauldian sense of the social mechanisms that build the self-identity of the human subject.

Tyeer cautions against defining adab as an elitist culture but still approaches adab from the perspective of hermeneutics; she employs the concept to describe a positive model of reading, exemplified by the philological interventions by the scholarly and literary elite in the history of Arabic literature during the period between the eighth and the nineteenth centuries. Tyeer attributes the quality of “critical” to the “adabized” reader, who possesses critical hermeneutical tools, critical thinking, and understanding. This reader demonstrates “critical justice” (*inşāf*) when engaging with literary texts, comprehending deeper layers of meaning, and engaging with broader discourses within the repository of Arabic literature across time and space. In this respect, the adabized reader is a “well-tempered” reader, an apt analogy to *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, J.S. Bach’s two sets of piano pieces that allow the player to perform in all possible keys with harmony. Tyeer contrasts

this with the “fanatic” reader, who is “disconnected” from adab’s repository and its epistemic community. This reader only employs limited hermeneutical tools and resorts to literal modes of reading, unable to grasp nonliteral levels of signification or appreciate the broader discourses they refer to. Consequently, the fanatic reader’s restricted hermeneutics leads to predatory reading, creating dissonance, and social conflict. Tyeer’s case studies in the book illustrate how adab fostered harmony and critical justice by resolving conflicts during moments of crisis in understanding.

In the first chapter, Tyeer offers a conceptual history (*begriffsgeschichte*) of adab, humanity (*murū’a*), and refinement (*ẓarf*), exploring their semantic interconnection through anthologies, epistolary writing, and manuals of social etiquette by the Abbasid literati (*adīb*) written between the eighth and tenth centuries. Abbasid authors, as Tyeer demonstrates, posited an interdependence between these notions. *Murū’a* denotes the most general sense of being the ideal human who manifests all the human virtues in its praxis and in the soul. Among these virtues, hospitality, both material and emotional, was considered essential for mitigating conflicts and enhancing sociability. The chapter primarily focuses on decorum, morals, and rules of sociability, ranging from fine clothing to eloquence. A fascinating passage in a work on refinement, *al-Muwashshā* by the Abbasid *adīb* Al-Washshā’ (d. 937) defines the mutual relationship between adab, humanity, and refinement with the terms “the laws of humanity” but “the limits of adab” and “the embellishments of the refined” (Tyeer 2025, 24) (emphasis is mine). Adab embodies the ways in which individuals realize knowledge with integrity and uphold the honor of others. In this context, adab translates an individual’s education and knowledge into social capital by making this knowledge pertinent and respectful to the social norms of the epistemic community and the honor of its members.

The second chapter introduces a significant shift from the traditional conceptualizations of adab as morals and decorum. Instead, it delves into an intellectual form of hospitality, specifically the act of translation. Tyeer examines *Kalīla wa-Dimna* by Ibn Al-Muqaffa’ (d. 759), classical fables with Sanskrit origins, as an exemplary instance of intellectual hospitality displayed by the author to an exogenous culture. According to Tyeer, *Kalīla wa-Dimna*, akin to other translations of Greek philosophy and science during the Abbasid period, fostered “cosmopolitan conditions of reading” by presenting truth regardless of its origin. The Abbasid translation movement contributed to the hospitality prevalent within the adab-sphere. Tyeer further argues that *Kalīla wa-Dimna* extended its hospitality towards the reader as well. The text acknowledged varying levels of understanding among readers, enabling them to access the text in multiple ways. The figurative speech (*mathal*) in the work, which generates multiple meanings and discourses, enhances hospitable conditions of reading by addressing readers based on their different levels of comprehension.

The third chapter shifts the focus to Islamic philosophical tradition, primarily examining Ibn Tufayl’s (d. 1185) famous philosophical allegory, *Ḥayy b. Yaqzān*, written in Andalusia. According to Tyeer, *Ḥayy b. Yaqzān* serves as an illustrative case of crises in understanding and “creative critique” and dialogue on various levels. These include the author’s engagement with philosophical discourses, and the debate on the nature of discourse and speech within the work.

Adab is evident in the debate on discourse between different interlocutors, such as the author's engagement with philosophical ideas or the discussion on the reliability of speech in accessing truths. The moments of crisis in understanding and the doubts on the reliability of speech in accessing truths are accommodated by the adabized interlocutors, including the author himself and the character of Absāl, who engaged in a critical dialogue that was, however, hospitable, thus in conformity with the adabized reading.

The fourth chapter delves into the contentious legacy of the poet al-Ma'arrī (d. 1057) in the Arabic literary history. Tyer elucidates how the divergent methodologies of *taqlīd* and critical justice (*inṣāf*) played a pivotal role in the contestation among scholars and littérateurs spanning centuries over al-Ma'arrī's poetry. Tyer illustrates the limited hermeneutics employed by fanatical readers, exemplified by scholars like Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 1201) or Ibn Kathir (d. 1373), who attacked the poet's reputation by making unsubstantiated allegations of unbelief in his poetry based on a select few couplets. Reacting against the damage inflicted on al-Ma'arrī's legacy, Tyer demonstrates how the adabized readers endeavored to restore justice to the poet by exposing that the accusations of unbelief were rooted in the methodology of *taqlīd* and predatory reading. These readers relied on weak transmissions and cherry-picked couplets without verifying their authenticity. Thus, although Tyer does not use the term, adab embodied *taḥqīq* (verification), a term widely used in Arabic logic and philosophy, which entails seeking truth through rational proofs, possessing the requisite philological skills, and exercising critical judgment.

The fifth chapter expands on an anecdote about al-Ma'arrī, which recounts how the poet transformed an insult directed at him into a challenge against all communities of adab. Upon having been called a dog by a man after accidentally stumbling on him, the poet responds with a counter-insult that did not target just the insulting man but all the literati: "The dog is the one who does not know the seventy names for the dog." Tyer interprets the power of Al-Ma'arrī's counter-insult as the reaffirmation of his humanity through his adab, his belonging to the epistemic community, his mastery of the Arabic language, and his erudition in the literary repository (Tyer uses the term *corpus*), which is encapsulated in knowing the seventy names of the dog. Centuries later, the famous Mamluk scholar al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505) accepted Al-Ma'arrī's challenge and attempted to list seventy names for the dog in Arabic in a lexicographical poem. The power of the institution of adab is evident in al-Suyūṭī's obligation to take up the challenge to demonstrate his erudition and thus his legitimate belonging to the epistemic community of adab.

The sixth chapter probes the crisis faced by the institution of adab in the nineteenth century, particularly in the context of literary modernity and its emerging narrative genres, such as the novel and short story. As an exemplary case study, Tyer examines Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq's (d. 1887) *Leg over Leg*, a hybrid work that aims to revive premodern adab compendia. Tyer's discussion of the work is guided by several pertinent themes from the previous chapters, including the tension between the ideal adabized vs. the non-adabized reader, the crises of understanding entailed by the restricted hermeneutics of the latter, against the critical understanding of the former that restores social justice and harmony. Additionally, Tyer explores adab as the technologies of the self, the disciplinary practices of maintaining the well-being of the body and the soul; and adab as erudition

in the literary corpus, and the problem of language qua language. Beyond the work itself, Tyeer also addresses broader issues surrounding it, such as anxieties about the loss of adab, language, and the collective memory due to the break with the classical literary tradition and the introduction of modern literary forms. These anxieties include the influence of colonial powers and the dominance of their cultural forms, and the impact of Orientalism.

I would have appreciated a deeper exploration and historicization of the adabized reader and the non-adabized reader in the book. While Tyeer makes a compelling argument about how the crises of understanding highlight the significance of adab, the book lacks a comprehensive examination of how premodern and modern readers adapted these select canonical texts within their historical and social contexts, and how these adaptations served asserting their elite identity, legitimizing their own epistemic communities, and verifying their truth claims against rival perspectives in the moments of change in the state and society.

It would be fanatical to criticize the author for not integrating the canons, conceptualizations, and performances of adab in other Islamicate literatures, as the book limits its subject to the Arabic literary tradition. However, the book neglects to explore how the Arabic literary tradition was nurtured in what Shahab Ahmed referred to as the Balkans-to-Bengal complex (Ahmed 2016). The book's scope is strictly limited to the Arab lands. Nevertheless, the Arabic adab played a pivotal role in the education of the scholarly and literary elite in the premodern Persianate and the Ottoman worlds. For instance, the classical Arabic poetry and literary prose were widely read across madrasas in these regions, particularly through scholastic rhetorical works that investigated the study of language qua language, the ways of nonliteral signification, and the aspects of eloquent speech, in Arabic and through excerpts from classical Arabic literature.¹ This study of Arabic language and eloquence through the cultural repository of adab equipped scholars with the necessary philological skills and informed their argumentation and methods of verification (*taḥqīq*) when dealing with scholarly texts.² The history of Arabic literary tradition in the premodern Persianate and Ottoman intellectual milieus remains largely unexplored.³ Given the limitations of her academic discipline and the expectations of the audience, Tyeer understandably engages with texts that are firmly established in the Arabic literary canon, and primarily available in English translation. I have no issue with that. My concern, however, is that by disregarding the hermeneutical engagements with Arabic literary tradition in other intellectual milieus, does the author not emulate Ma'arrī, and effectively expel these epistemic communities from the institution of adab, akin to the expulsion of the insulting man?

An illustrative historical case of the tension between the adabized and the non-unadabized reader would be the uneasy encounters between Ottoman and Arab scholars after the Ottoman takeover of Syria and Egypt in 1516–7. After the establishment of the Ottoman rule, Ottoman

¹ A recent study of debates on Arabic rhetoric among fourteenth-century Persian scholars can be found in Harb (2020).

² For *taḥqīq* as the scholarly methodology of deep reading (see el-Rouayheb 2015, chap. 2).

³ For a timely intervention, see *Philological Encounters* (2022).

scholars were appointed to important bureaucratic and judicial positions in the Arab lands. However, the local Arab literary and scholarly elite often complained about their lack of adab and poor Arabic (Pfeifer 2022). This raises the question: Aren't the ideals of being the perfect human, possessing or lacking adab, historically and politically conditioned? What factors influenced the judgments of possessing or lacking adab in scholarly and literary engagements with texts and in the encounters between epistemic communities in these milieus?

Tyeer's book, despite reservations, illuminates the intricate processes of meaning-making and the diverse discourses that shaped the manifestations of the ideal human being in the Islamic world during both the premodern period and on the eve of modernity. The book undoubtedly makes a significant contribution to our understanding of adab through its original approach, which reconceptualizes it as the ethics of hermeneutical engagement and the accommodation of other texts and discourses that might otherwise be denied from a non-adabized perspective. Tyeer demonstrates that language, literary and philosophical discourses were the repositories of adab, providing the legitimate ways of accessing Truth, both pertaining to the human condition and the divine.

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