THE GENESIS OF MAQAMAH IN ARABIC LITERATURE

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Abstract

The term maqamah literally means a standpoint, but technically, it refers to that genre of Arabic literary heritage, which is characterized by a style and theme of specific feature. It is a literary discourse that is set within a framework of encounters or séances in which the imaginary characters are made to play specific and not really stereotypical roles. Although a number of efforts came to have anticipated Abu Muhammad al-Qasim al-Hariri (1054 – 1122 C.E), his own contribution has remained the most influential up till today, not only in the Arab world but also in Nigeria. The main objective of the research is to assess the academic and artistic values of the maqamah genre as espoused by al-Hariri with a view to identifying his role in the development of Arabic literature.

After the full development of Arabic literature, literary artifices and ornate rhymes were used frequently and become a primary consideration in prose writings. The most significant manifestations are found in the *Maqamat*, a genre originally consisting of witty and dramatic stories told to an audience in beautiful, elegant rhymed prose. It marked an important turning point in the literary arena of Arabic Literature of the medical period. Various definitions have been given to the word Maqamah and such variations are inevitable especially when the word is viewed against its historical background and development through the ages. The word was used to signify a place occupied by a particular people. This can be supported by a poetic of Musayyab bn. ‘Alas when he said:

وَكَلَّمِهِ كَتَبُ مَقَامِهِ وَتَبُوُّ فَيْيِهِ أَطْبَ

Meaning: the sand of their place is like perfume, while the sand of their graves is sweeter than perfume. (Hanal-Fakhum, 1963)

In the pre-Islamic period the word Maqamah carried an entirely different connotations, it meant “sitting sessions where talks and discussions usually take place”. This could be seen in a verse which belongs to Zuhayr bn. Abi Sulma of the pre-Islamic period.

وَقَبْلَهُ مَقَامَتُهُ حَسَنٌ وَجوْهُهُ وَأَنْدِيَهُ يَنْتَابُهَا وَالفَعْل

Meaning: associated with them are beautifully looking sitting sessions and gatherings engaged with word and deed (Shawqi, 1971).

Also, a pre-Islamic poet whose name was Labid al-‘Amriyy attested to this point when he said:

وَمَقَامَةَ غَلِبَ الرِّقَابِ كَانُهُمْ جَنَّ لَمَّا بَابُ اَلْحَصَرِ قَوْمَ

Meaning: Many a people with thick neck as if they are spirits at the door of Hasir (The King) (Shawqi, 1971).

In the Islamic period, we find the word used to denote a position or seat and this could be seen in the Holy Qur’an thus:

أَيَّ اَلْفَرِيقَيْنِ خَيْرُ مَقَامٍ وَأَحْسَنُ نَزْى١

Meaning: which of the two sides is best in position (Qur’an 19:72)

The meaning of the word however got widened during the Umayyad period to denote religious devotional addresses delivered at the assemblies of men surrounding Caliphs. According to Ibn Mudabir in his book entitled Risalah ‘Adhra volume 2 page 143, he said that such a speaker may be looking for rewards after the speech and that was why we often heard many orators of this age saying:

اَرْحَمْوا مَقَامِي هَذَا

Meaning: “Bless this my position or speech”

Later in the Abbasid period, the word came to mean a benevolence, soliciting speech east in a peculiar language style. It is the most significant development in that it was under this age that Badi’
az-Zaman - the de facto precursor of what could be called classical Maqamah tailored his composition within this thematic realm (Hanal-Fakhuri, 1963).

It should not go unobserved that even though Maqamah reached its perfection stage during the Abbasid period and particularly on the hand of Hamadhan there had been some general elements and features running through since the nascent days of its development. These can be enumerated as follows:

A. Maqamah never ceased to be associated with sitting sessions in which talks were given
B. It was always identified with a particular theme be it didactic or literary,
C. The Maqamah had always had a particular audience in mind which could be members of the same tribe or the aristocrats or the commoners.

In trying to identify the motivation for the emergence of Maqamah, two factors readily came to mind. Firstly, the economic situation and secondly, the tide of literary verbal jugglery and contrivance holding sway during this period.

The economic situation in the 4th century A.H. was nothing but favourable to many people including scholars. There were poverty, disease and hunger pervading the strata of the whole community. Under these circumstances it was only natural that the type of literary production that would surface should attune to the realities of the time and the Maqamah did by used as means of sustenance through convert dignified begging.

As was pointed out earlier, the tide of literary manipulation and ornamentation had already been in force before the appearance of Badi’ az-Zaman. In fact right from the lime of Ibn al-Amid (970 A.D) literary prowess started to be judged by the ability of the practitioner to write in flowery language and to cast his message in otiose establishment. Hence the environment was conducive for the emergence of multidimensional adventures stories cast in the then popular language and style with all its concomitant decorations and this crystallized in the emergence of Maqamah.

The Evolution of Maqamah

Prior to the writing of Maqamah by Badi’ az-Zaman al-Hamadhani there had been attempts in this direction. Notable among people who made such attempt was Abu Bakr, al-Hussayn bn Durayd al-Azdi (321 A.H./933 A.D) (Hanal-Fakhuri, 1963) Ibn Abd Rabih the author of al-Iqd al-Farid and Ibn Qutaybah took Maqamah back to the period far from that of Hamadhani. Abu Ishaq al-Husari the author Zahr al-Adab stated thus:

وَلَمَّا رَأَى الْبَدِيْعُ ابْنُ إِبْرَاهِيمُ بِنْ حَسَنَ بْنِ الْحَسَنَ بْنِ دِرْيَادَ الأَزْدِي اَغْرَبَ أَرْبَعِينَ حَدِيثًا وَذَكَرَهُ اَسْتَطَرْهَا مِنْ يَنْبِيعَ صَدْرَهُ وَأَبْتَقَهَا مِنْ مَعْنِى فَتْرَةٍ وَأَبْدَأَهَا الْأَقْصَارُ وَأَهْدَأَهَا أَفْكَارًا وَضَمَّارًا فِي مَعْرُوفٍ عَجْمِيٍّ وَفَوْفَاطَ حُوَائِشً فَجَاهُ أَكْرَمُهُ يَنْبُو عَنْ قِبْلَةِ الْطَّبَاعِ وَلاً تَرْفَعُ لَهُ حَجْبُ الْآسِتَمَاعِ وَتَوْسُّعُ فِيهَا إِذْ صُرَفَ فَأْقَالَهَا وَمَعَابِيْهَا فِي وُجُوعٍ مُخَلَّطَةٌ وَضَرُوبٌ مُنْسَرِفَةٌ عَائِضَةٌ بَرَائِعَةٌ فَمَقَايِةٌ فِي الْأَكْنَادِ تَذْوِبُ تَقْرَأُ تَقْطُرُ حَسَنًا

Meaning: "when Badi’ was Abu Bakr Muhammad b. Hassan b. Hassan b. Durayd that he invented forty speeches. He remembered that he has discovered it from the source of his chest and chose them from the sources of his own thought showing this for peoples perusal, giving these out to thought and mind in non-Arabic fields couched in rough languages most of which disagree with one's nature and unattractive going a fieldtherein by using their lexical. Items and meanings in different ways and multiple forms. Hence, he countered this by composing four hundred beautiful and attractive Maqamah on beggingss dissolving and dropping down like rain in terms of Euphemism"(Anis, 1963)

It may be interesting to look into the Maqamah and do a brief comparison between it and that of Hamadhani. Perhaps this will explain better the claim that Ibn Durayd's piece influenced the Hamadhani's. One of the hadiths of Ibn Durayd reads:

كان لرجل ابنه يقال لأخذه عمرو والأخير ربحة وكانا قد برعا في العلم والآداب فلما بلغ أبوهما أقصى عمره على القرأن دعاهما نيبو عليهما وعرف مبالغ عللما فلما حضرا قال عمرو وهو الأخير أخبره عن أخوه الرجل البك قال السيد الجود القليل الأنداء الساد السادة العادات الفرمان المعصم الزمان العظيم الزمان الكثير الحسن الباسح الزواد
Meaning: "A man has two sons; one of them is called Amr and the other Rabî’ah. Both of them are knowledgeable. When their father became old and quite near to death, he called both of them in order to test their understanding. When both of them came to him, he said to Amr, who was the elder, inform me about the men you loved most. He replied: a generous leader, little in criticism, with great ancestry, firm in principle, high in determination, great in generosity to his guest, with many enviers (because of his greatness) brave and ever ready, ..." (al-Hariri)

From the above example of Ibn Durayd's work, one could see that the rhyming style he used compares favourably with the styles of Hamadhani, as manifested in his Maqamah. Hence some assert that it is sage to say that al-Hamadhani was influenced by Ibn Durayd.

Nonetheless, this view is not brought by many other scholars who assert that it was Badi‘ az-Zaman and nobody else originated this brand of writing. A close examination of the historical facts and circumstances surrounding the evolution of Maqamah will debunk this assertion. In the first instance, the word Maqamah as a technical term for that new brand of artistic writing was not in use before Badi‘ az-Zaman. Furthermore, if the statement of al-Hariri in the preface of his own Maqamah is anything to go by one would readily support the explanation preferred that Badi‘ az-Zaman was the originator of Maqamah writing. The preface of Hariri’s Maqamah read thus:

وبعد قاتله قد جرى في بعض أندية الأدب الذي ركبت في هذا العصر ريح وزين مصباحك نكر المقابلة التي ابدعها بديع الزمان وعامة همذان رحمة الله تعالى فأتام من إضاءته حكم وطاعته غم أن أنشئي مقالة نكر فيها الديع ون لم يدرك الأمل شأو الضياع...هذا مع اعتراضي بأن البديع رحمة الله يقابلها صاحب أبيات وأنا المستحسن بعدد الأئمة مقالة ولو أثري بلغة مقالة لا يترف إلا من قصائده ولا ييسر ذاك المسرح إلا بلونه. والله قد الأقام:

...وهي سقى بعد ما كان لها هر مجيء مشوقاه بالترن

وهي شوفي بعد ما كان لها هر مجيء مشوقاه بالترن

بكت شوجها عند الصبح ففساحت إليها دعوى الغرمن من كل مجم

و لكن بكت فيل فيهن لي البكا فلكا فقلت الفضل للرخيمة

Meaning: "And now in a meeting devoted to that learning whose breeze has stilled in this age, whose lights are gone out. There ran a mention of the assemblies which had been invented by Badi‘ az-Zaman, the sage of Hamadhani. He suggested to me whose suggestion is a decree and obedience to whom is a prize that I should compose assemblies following the method of Badi‘, even if a weak camel cannot match a strong one. Yet I acknowledge that Badi‘ az-Zaman (may God bless him) is the fore-runner of goals and the owner of signs and that anyone who aims of composing Maqamah after him even if he were given the eloquence of Qudamah, cannot but take from the surplus he had left and would not be able to make that nights’ Journey except by his guidance. Only God knows how beautiful the expression is:

1. The shout during deep nights that are overwhelmed by chanting aroused my passion after it had been dormant.
2. She cried out her agony before noon and tears from all directions converged on her.
3. If I were to cry out of passion fro Su’da before he did could have cured my soul before regret over came me.
4. But it lamented before me and its cry aroused my own lamentation and I said the superiority is to the one that first came (al-Hariri).

From the above extract, we can understand that Hariri personally admitted the supremacy of Hamadhani and that he has voiced out in clear and unmistakable terms. However, in my own candid opinion, Hamadhani deserved to be respected as the originator of Maqamah regardless of the period he emerged cannot be over-emphasised.

Furthermore, the fact that there is no comparison between the compositions of Ibn During and that of Badi‘ az-Zaman in terms of styles subject matter, thought and orientation strike basis out of the assertion that Badi‘ az-Zaman encored the musical note sung by Ibn Durayd. Nonetheless, the ultimate aim of the two revealed itself to be the teaching of Arabic language to burgeoning learners. In fact, al-Khawarizm, who was arch-rival of Badi‘ az-Zaman honestly observed that Maqamah was Badi‘ az-Zaman’s tour de force. This comment is very significant
because it came from an opponent who could not have revealed, were it to be that Badi’ az-Zaman’s work was an imitation.

The Writers of Maqamah


Common Themes in the Maqamah of Hariri

Ruse
One of the common themes of Maqamah is Kidyah (ruse). In fact, ruse is the characteristics of the hero of each of Maqamah of Hamadhani, Hariri and Yaziji. The ruse is usually use as a mean of achieving a certain aim of the hero. The hero pretends to have one problem or the other which he believes his audience should solve. At times, he distinguishes himself as a woman or another character. But no sooner has he duped his audience than his reporter identifies him and he in turn discloses his secret to him.

An example of ruse is found in al-Maqamah al-Makiyyah of all-Hariri. Harith b. Hamnian reports that Abu Zayd al-Saruji the hero of Hariri’s Maqamah and his son found their way into the midst of a group of pilgrims appearing as sad persons. The pilgrims asked the father the cause of the misery and he pointed out that his knowledge has caused his poverty and hardship saying:

وَلَوْ خَبَرْتُ حَسِيبًا وَنَسِيبًا وَمَذَهِبًا
وَمَا حَوْتُ مَعْرُفَيْنِ مِنَ الْعُلَوْمِ اِلْمَخْبَأَ
لَمْ أَعْرَّضْ شَهَبًا فِي أَنَّ دَالٌ أَبِي

If you examine my personality, my family background, my manner and all kinds of selecter knowledge that my education has earned me, (al-Hariri)

I would hesitate to conclude that my education is my disease.

Riddles
One other theme which is common among the Maqamah writers is riddles (alghaz). This is usually employed in imparting knowledge to people in a way showing the writer as an outstanding scholar. Riddles are also employed to display excellence with the aim of getting gifts from people. In the Maqamah of Hariri called "Ma riyyah", we are informed that two persons brought a ease before the judge of Ma’rah, one of them, Abu Zayd al-Saruji, claimed that he “had a slave, slender in phvsique, with smooth cheek and persevering; she catches cold in July. She has a palm with finger and a mouth without teeth. She stings with piercing tooth and struts in broad garment and she appears in black and white...” He then claimed that the accused, his son borrowed her and returned her while he had deflowered her and the compensation he paid he could not agree with.

But when the son was asked to defend himself and explain what they said in puzzle, it was discovered that the slave girl was a needle which Abu Zayd lent to his son who broke it. The son explains thus:

أَعَارَنِي إِبْرَهِيمُ آمَرُوا
رَا عَفَاهَا الْبَيْلَ وَسَوَّدَاهَا
فَأَنْصُرَتُ فِي يَدِي بِخَطَأٍ مَنِيَ لَمْ أَجْدَبْ مَقُودَهَا

"He lent me a needle to patch rags which calamity has befallen and rendered black. It mistakenly broke in my hand when I pulled it lead. (al-Hariri)

We are then told that the judge pitied them at last and gave them some money. Instruction: Instruction is another theme common to most of the Maqamah writers. Different types of knowledge are taught through this medium: grammar, jurisprudence, philology, science e.t.c. Though the instruction is a tactful means of getting some gifts from the audience, it is nonetheless educational.

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In Maqamah al-Qati’iyah of al-Hariri, Abu Zayd found himself in a group of people who were chanting and their singer happened to say:

"If it is staying together that is sweet to him, then let there be joining together. And if it is separation, let there be separation like divorce. (al-Hariri)

The congregation queried the singer on why he made the first accusative and the second nominative. The singer asserted that it was used in that way by Sibawayhi. His response generated controversy until Abu Zayd cut in and pointed out that the two cases are normal, depending on what the writer has in his mind which is not uttered. They at first argued with him but when he bombarded them with more puzzling grammatical questions, they finally surrendered.

The Styles of Maqamah

The general style of Maqamah is a rhymed one embellished with rhetorical tropes which often go out of the line of moderation, in other words verbal contrivance is a prominent feature in the body of Maqamah literature. This can explain the low quality of stories in which its message are couched since these stories or adventures are only used as vehicles to convey the message which is very eclectic as it affects various fields of Arabic linguistic and literary horizons.

What Maqamah did, one authority explains, "was to invest with the literary graces of Saj (rhymed prose) and the glamour of impromptu composition the old time tale in alternate prose and verse and, by a stroke of genius to adopt as the mouthpiece of (its) art that familiar figure in popular story, the witty vagabond (Kritzeck, 1964).

Al-Hariri displayed his mastering of the language, competent use of rhetorical beautifiers and playing on words in his Maqamah. In his sixth Maqamah, al-Maqamah ul-Maraghiyyah, he tried his hand on the succession of dotted and undotted words, thus:

"Meanness, may fortune cast down the eyelid of your enviers, dishonours." In the sixteenth Maqamah, al-Maqamah al-Maghribiyyah al-Hariri also tried his hand on reading from right to left or vice versa whereby the meaning of the sentence cannot be altered:

"Reprimand a boring fellow; make great the hope of the recompense of your lord" Al-Hariri further changed this style into poem when he said:

"Give the poor when he seeks your help and guide your honour when a person misbehaves"(al-Hariri)

Furthermore, in the twenty-eighth al-Maqamah al-Samarqandi of al-Harir, he showed the extent to which he can display his mastery of play on words. Abu Zayd was made to ascend the pulpit of a mosque and deliver a sermon which contained only undotted letters which read thus:

"All of you, work, may Allah have mercy upon you, the work of the pious, exert yourselves towards your return with the exertion of the sound, curb your lusts cubing of enemies, make ready for your departure with the readiness of the blissful.

Conclusion

The maqamah was an original medieval Arabic Literary form. It was species of composition originated by or first associated with the name of Badi ‘az-Zaman al-Hamadhan and subsequently with Hariri Maqama (plural maqamat) are written in rhymed prose but including poetry. The hero of
the maqamah is a clever rogue whose exploits are presented by a narrator whose path keeps crossing that of the rogue hero. Eloquence and verbal mastery are among the chief tools of the rogue’s trade as he attempts to outwit his listeners and gain from them. Hariri’s Maqamah are more rhetorically fanciful than that of al-Hamadhani. Maqamat-al-Hariri has immense academic and artistic values in Arabic countries and among Nigerian Arabic Scholars. Numerous Nigerian Arabic Scholars emulated the ornate style of the genre in their Arabic Literary production. Such Scholars include: Uthman Dan Fodio, Abdullah bn fodo, Muhammad Bello, Muhammad Nasir Kabara and Adam Abdullah al-llori.

References