

THE THEMES OF THE *SHU'ŪBĪ* POLEMIC: AN ANALYSIS

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Abstrak

Shu'ūbiyyah dianggap sebagai satu gerakan anti Arab. Ia lebih merupakan gerakan yang memprotes kesusasteraan berbanding politik. Sebagai satu gerakan kesusasteraan, *Shu'ūbiyyah* adalah satu usaha subjektif yang bertindak balas terhadap perasaan sesuatu pihak atau untuk mempertahankan latarbelakang budaya sesuatu pihak. Justeru, penulisan ini melihat tema-tema perbincangan golongan *Shu'ūbiyyah*. Ia dimulakan dengan perbincangan tentang tema-tema seperti keturunan, bahasa, keindahan puisi, kelebihan dari segi kefasihan dan beberapa budaya orang Arab sebelum Islam. Perbincangan akan dilakukan dengan menganalisis pandangan golongan pro-*Shu'ūbī* dan bagaimana golongan pro-Arab melihat pandangan tersebut.

INTRODUCTION

Shu'ūbiyyah is a group which encompasses the concept of equality between all Muslims, regardless of their ethnic background, as well as non-Arabs who either reject the claims of the Arabs superiority or even go beyond that and despise the Arabs. In other words, the *Shu'ūbiyyah* could either mean a group which believes in equality between all people, or which reject the claims of the Arabs superiority, as well as which despises the Arabs. It is, in fact, a literary movement since this group is represented by scholars and men of letters. Thus, they had no intention to argue on any political side and then establish a government, but tended to argue in the literary field, corresponding to their role as authors and scholars. They focussed their argument on the superiority of the Arabs by combating them in some custom of the pre-Islamic Arabs, lineage, language, beauty of poetry and merit of eloquence.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE THEMES OF THE *SHU'ŪBĪ* POLEMIC

There are many fields where the *Shu'ūbī* attacked the Arabs. The first theme seems to refer especially to some customs of the pre-Islamic Arabs. In fact, the *Shu'ūbī* have

their own reasons to combat the Arabs in this matter. Goldziher¹ believes that the chief point here is to disgrace the Arabs. The example to be viewed here is the use of the *mikhsarah*² at public speeches. The *Shu'ūbī* have their own reason for arguing against the use of the staff at public speeches, since the staff, according to them, is used for beating rhythm, while spears are used for fighting and sticks for attack. Thus, there is no link at all between the staff and speech. The *Shu'ūbī* also believe that the use of such thing can divert men's mind from the contents of the speech. It is also illogical to suppose that the listeners would be stimulated by the use of the staff and it cannot be imagined how the staff could further the speech.³

Al-Jāhiz, however, proves that there is a basis for the staff being used by the pre-Islamic Arabs. According to Al-Jāhiz,⁴ the use of the staff is taken from an honorable source. Al-Jāhiz proves that the prophet Sulaymān bin Dāwūd used the staff in preaching and counseling, and so on. The staff is even used as a proof of the prophethood of the prophet Mūsā bin 'Imrān.

In terms of lineage, the *Shu'ūbī* took pride in the fact that they came from the descendants of Ishāq bin Ibrāhīm, since Ishāq is the son of Sārah, a free woman. They also claimed that the Arabs were descended from Ismā'il, who is the son of Hājar, a slave woman.⁵ The *Shu'ūbī* even go beyond that claim, when their poets categorise them as *Banū al-Ahrār*, while the Arabs are identified as *Banū al-Lakhnā'*, using the word *lakhnā'* which is used by the Arabs to mean a slave woman.⁶ As regard the lineage, the *Shu'ūbī* also claimed that the pre-Islamic Arabs had no legal marriage contract. Thus, when the woman became pregnant, she could not claim the man to be the father of her unborn baby.⁷

¹ Goldziher, I. (ed.), *Muslim Studies*, S.M. Stern. (tr.) from the German by C.R. Barber and S.M. Stern, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1967, vol. 1 p. 156.

² Something which is held by a man in his hand. It could be a staff, whip or stick.

³ Al-Jāhiz, Abū 'Uthmān 'Amr bin Baḥr, *al-Bayān wa al-Tabyīn*, 'Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn (ed.), n.d. vol 3, p. 12, Beirut: Dār al-Jil; I. Goldziher, *op.cit.*, pp. 156 - 157.

⁴ Al-Jāhiz, Abū 'Uthmān 'Amr bin Baḥr, *op.cit.*, pp. 30 - 31.

⁵ Ibn Qutaybah, 'Abd Allāh bin Muslim, "Kitāb al-'Arab," in *Rasā'il al-Bulaghā'*, 1954, p. 351.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 352

⁷ Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, Aḥmad bin Muḥammad, *al-'Iqd al-Farīd*, vol. 3, Muḥammad Sa'īd 'Aryān (ed.), al-Qāhirah: Maṭba'at al-Istiḳāmah, 1940, p. 362.

Ibn Qutaybah, however, proves that not all slaves among the Arabs are called *lakhnā'*. According to Ibn Qutaybah, the term *lakhnā'* is used to mean a slave girl who is despicable and is used to guard a camel, water a camel, collect firewood and so on. Ibn Qutaybah gives another example like *al-amah al-wak'ā'* i.e. a slave girl, referring to those who have distorted toes. However, this does not mean that all slave girls have distorted toes. In the context of the word *lakhnā'*, Ibn Qutaybah stresses that the slave girl is to be called *lakhnā'* because of her foul smell.

Concerning Hājar, it seems to Ibn Qutaybah that there is no reason to call her *lakhnā'*. The reason may be the fact that she was purified by God from every blemish and also she is the mother of Ismā'il and Muhammad. Ibn Qutaybah also opposed the use of the term *lakhnā'* to refer to all slaves. According to him, if this is acceptable, then it is quite possible to say that all highborn men who are born of slave can be described as sons of a *lakhnā'*, which is similar to sons of an *amah* (slave girl). Ibn Qutaybah produces evidences that slave girls gave birth to the Caliphs and the elite, as well as the godly, with such examples as 'Alī bin al-Husayn bin 'Alī bin Abī Tālib, al-Qāsim bin Muḥammad bin Abī Bakr al-Ṣiddiq and Sālim bin 'Abd Allāh bin 'Umar bin al-Khaṭṭāb.⁸ Regarding the claim that the pre-Islamic Arabs had no legal marriage contract, it was true. In fact, this kind of contract existed in the Islamic period. Therefore, it is unthinkable to say that having no legal marriage contract is shameful, since this contract was revealed in the period after.

Another theme of the *Shu'ūbī* polemic depended on language. This can be divided into three parts. The first one is the richness of language. The *Shu'ūbī*, in many ways, tried to prove the richness of the non-Arab language. In this context, the *Shu'ūbī* claimed that some of the Arabic words were originally derived from non-Arab languages. Here, the *Shu'ūbī* claimed that such names as *al-Mawsil* (Mosul in European sources) goes back to *Nū* or *Bū-Ardashīr* in the Persian period.⁹ Another example is *Bardashīr* which is claimed as an arabization of *Ardashīr*,¹⁰ and *Bardha'ah* which is an arabization of *Bardahdār*.¹¹

It is, in fact, true to say that many Arabic words are originally from Persian. Such examples are *al-kūz* (small jug / mug), *al-jarrah* (jar), *al-ibrīq* (jug), *al-tast* (basin), *al-khiwān* (table), *al-ṭabaq* (plate), *al-qas'ah* (large bowl), *al-khazz* (silk / silk fabric), *al-*

⁸ Ibn Qutaybah, *op.cit.*, p. 352.

⁹ Yāqūt Ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Ḥāmawī, *Mu'jam al-Buldān*, (vol. 4), Jacut's Geographisches Wörterbuch: aus den Handschriften Zu. Berlin: In Commission bei Breckhaus, 1866, p. 683.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 555.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 558.

dibaj (silk cloth / silk brocade), *al-sundus* (silk brocade / sarsenet)¹² and so on. However, the pro-Arabs cause like Ibn Fāris, defended Arabic saying that Arabic is the best and richest of all languages. In this context, Arabic, according to him, cannot be translated into any other language, as the Gospels from Syriac could be translated into Ethiopian and Greek, or as Torah and Psalter and other books of God could be translated into Arabic. The reason was that the non-Arabs cannot compete with the Arabs in the wide use of metaphorical expressions.¹³ Ibn Fāris mentions an example from the Qur'an which reads:

فَضَرَبْنَا عَلَى آذَانِهِمْ فِي الْكَهْفِ سِنِينَ عَدَدًا

According to Ibn Fāris, it would not be possible to interpret the above verse, "in a language with words which reproduce the exact sense; circumlocutions would have to be used, what is summarized would have to be unrolled, what is separated connected, and what is hidden revealed..."¹⁴

The interpretation of the above verse is as follows: "Then we drew (a veil) over their ears, for a number of years, in the Cave (so that they heard not)." This interpretation is not enough to reproduce the exact sense and thus more explanation is needed. The phrase 'drew (a veil) over their ears' actually means: "sealed their ears, so that they heard nothing. As they were in the cave they saw nothing. So they were completely cut off from the outer world. It was as if they had died, with their knowledge and ideas remaining at the point of time when they had entered the cave. It is as if a watch stops at the exact moment of some accident, and any one taking it up afterwards can precisely fix the time of the accident."¹⁵ It seems the verse can be paraphrased and but not translated.

Apart from the Qur'anic verses, there are also passages which can be translated only by extended paraphrase.¹⁶ For example a verse recited by Imru' al-Qays which reads:

¹² Amin, Ahmad, *Fajr al-Islām*, Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabi, 1969, p. 117.

¹³ Ibn Fāris, Abū al-Ḥusayn Ahmad, *al-Ṣāhibī*, al-Sayyid Ahmad Ṣāqir (ed.), Cairo: Maṭba'at 'Isā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī wa Shurakāhu, n.d., pp. 16 - 17; I. Goldziher, *op.cit.*, p. 196.

¹⁴ Ibn Fāris, *ibid.*, p. 17; I. Goldziher, *op.cit.*, p. 196

¹⁵ 'Abd Allāh Yūsuf 'Alī, *al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, (tr.), Riyād: Jāmi'at al-Imām Muḥammad Sa'ūd al-Islāmiyyah, n.d., p. 731.

¹⁶ Ibn Fāris, *op.cit.*, p. 18; Goldziher, *op.cit.*, p. 196.

فدع عنك نهباً صيح في حجراته # ولكن حديثنا ما حديث الرواحل

"Then let you alone spoil by the sides of which a shouting was raised # but relate to me a story - what is the story of the riding camels?"¹⁷ To understand the exact meaning of this poetic verse one needs to know that Imru' al-Qays recited the above verse addressed to Khālid bin Sadūs "in whose neighbourhood he had alighted and sojourned, and who had demanded of him some horses and riding-camels to pursue and overtake a party that had carried off some camels belonging to him (Imru' al-Qays), on Khālid's having gone away, and returned without anything."¹⁸

The second part of the language mocked by the *Shu'ūbī* is that they did not recognize the Arabic synonymy¹⁹ and finally attack *addād*²⁰ arguing that "if the same word stands for two different meanings, the person who is addressed does not know which of the two the speaker has in mind."²¹ In terms of not recognizing the Arabic synonymy, Ibn Fāris also defended this when he says that nobody can translate the Arabic nomenclature of the lion, spear and sword into another language. In Persian the lion has only one name but the Arabs give it 150 names. Ibn Fāris also mentions that Abū 'Abd Allāh bin Khālawayh al-Hamadhānī collected 500 names for the lion and 200 names for the snake.²² According to Lane, sword names exceed a thousand²³ and the lion is said to have a thousand names in Arabic language.²⁴ Among the synonyms of the sword are *al-naṣī*,²⁵ *al-riḍā'*, *al-wishāḥ* and *al-wiqām*.²⁶ Another synonym of the

¹⁷ Lane, E.W., *Arabic-English Lexicon*, Book 1, Part 2, Cambridge: The Islamic Society, 1877, p. 518.

¹⁸ Lane, 1877, *op.cit.*, p. 518; Ibn Fāris, *op.cit.*, p. 18; Ibn Qutaybah, *op.cit.*, p. 1115.

¹⁹ Goldziher, *op.cit.*, vol. 1, p. 195.

²⁰ Al-Anbārī, Muḥammad bin al-Qāsim, *Kitāb al-Addād*, The Arab Heritage no. 2, Muḥammad Abū al-Fadl Ibrāhīm (ed.), Kuwait: Printing and Publishing Department, 1960. What is meant by *addād* is the words which represent opposite meaning with completely identical pronunciation.

²¹ Goldziher, *op.cit.*, p. 198.

²² Ibn Fāris, *op.cit.*, p. 21.

²³ Lane, *op.cit.*, p. 1485.

²⁴ Lane, *op.cit.*, p. 57.

²⁵ The iron head or blade of a sword.

²⁶ Ibn Sīdah, Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī bin Ismā'īl (ed.), *al-Mukhaṣṣas*, Beirut: al-Maktabah al-Tijārī li al-Ṭibā'ah wa al-Tawzī' wa al-Nashr, n.d., p. 16.

sword is *dhubābat al-sayf*²⁷ i.e. the point or extremity of the sword, which is the part wherewith one strikes or its extremity with which one is pierced, or transpierced,²⁸ *al-sarīm*, *al-khalīl*, *al-ṣamṣamah*, *al-ma'thūr*,²⁹ *al-maqdūb*³⁰ and so on.³¹ Among the synonyms of spear are *qanāh*,³² *washīj*,³³ *jubbah*³⁴ and *mizajj*.³⁵

With regard to *aḍḍād*, al-Anbārī³⁶ mentions that Arabic words corrected each other; the former is attached to the latter, the addressed meaning is not known unless by rendering it fully and going through all of its letters and thus the words is allowable to have two opposite meanings because the word that precedes it and that comes after indicate the particularity of one of the two meanings. In the situation of speaking and information, a single meaning is required. One example to be viewed here is the word *jalal* in the verse which reads:

كل شيء ما خلا الموت جليل # والفتى يسعى ويلهيه الأمل

Generally, the word *jalal* means '*azīm* i.e a great, momentous or formidable thing, affair, matter, case or event.³⁷ *Jalal* can also be used to mean *yasīr* i.e. little or small in quantity, mean, contemptible, paltry and of no weight or worth.³⁸ In this con-

²⁷ The name of particular part of the sword.

²⁸ Lane, *op.cit.*, p. 952.

²⁹ An ancient sword which has passed by inheritance from great man to great man.

³⁰ A slender sword.

³¹ Al-Suyūṭī, 'Abd al-Rahmān Jalāl al-Dīn, *al-Muzhir fī 'Ulūm al-Lughah wa Anwā'ihā*, Muḥammad Aḥmad Jād al-Mawlā, 'Alī Muḥammad al-Bujawī and Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (ed.), n.p. Dār al-Fikr, n.d., vol. I, p. 409.

³² A spear that is hollow like a cane.

³³ Trees of which spears are made.

³⁴ The part of the spear-head that enters into the shaft.

³⁵ A short spear having at its lower extremity a *zujj* i.e. the iron which is fixed upon the lower extremity of a spear and with which the spear is stuck into the ground). See Ibn Sidāh, *op.cit.*, p. 28.

³⁶ Al-Anbārī, *op.cit.*, p. 2.

³⁷ Ibn Manzūr, Abū al-Faḍl Jamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad bin Mukarran al-Ifriqī, *Lisān al-'Arab*. Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, n.d., vol. 2, p. 117; Lane, *op.cit.*, p. 437.

³⁸ Ibn Manzūr, *op.cit.*, p. 117; Lane, *op.cit.*, p. 2977.

text, the sentences that preceded and proceed *jalal* define the meaning that everything except death is mean, and the intelligent man and those who could distinguish the evil from the good would not think that the word *jalal* means '*azīm* (great). Therefore, the verse means "everything except death is mean • a young man acts and diverts himself with hope."

Apart from that, the theme of the *Shu'ūbī* polemic depended on the beauty of poetry. In this case, the *Shu'ūbī* mention that "everything that Arabs can be proud of is centred in poetry," but the non-Arabs themselves claimed that they are outdone in poetry, especially by the Greeks.³⁹ Regarding this matter, the pro-Arab course says that the Greek's poetry is "unimportant, of little beauty, and lacks a proper metre." On the other hand, the Arabs possess the science of prosody i.e. '*ilm al-'arūd*.⁴⁰ This science is "the science of the rules whereby the perfect measures of Arabic verse are known from those which are broken, or the standard whereby verse is measured."⁴¹ In simple words, it is a term used for a collection of measures which we use to analyse the word into its phonetical and rhythmical elements. These measure are *al-tawīl*, *al-madīd*, *al-basīṭ*, *al-wafīr*, *al-kāmil*, *al-hazaj*, *al-rajaz*, *al-raml*, *al-sarī'*, *al-munsariḥ*, *al-khafīf*, *al-mudāri'*, *al-muqtaḍab*, *al-mujtathth*, *al-mutaqārib* and *al-mutadarik*.⁴² The function of this science is to "distinguish a regular poem from a defective one."⁴³

Another theme of the *Shu'ūbī* polemic is the merit of eloquence. In this case, non-Arabs suggested that someone who "strives for a high level of eloquence and desires to learn the strangest (choicest) expressions and to deepen his knowledge of the language should study the book of Karwand."⁴⁴ This statement can be understood that the skill of eloquence can only be found in the Persian work and that someone has to study to be eloquent.

In this case, al-Jāhīz says that the Persian's eloquence is always the result of long thought, deep study and counsel. This situation is in contrast to the Arabs who had no need to study to be eloquent, since their eloquence is spontaneous and extempore, as if the result of inspiration. Al-Jāhīz also mentions that as soon as the Arab speaker

³⁹ Goldziher, *op.cit.*, p. 155.

⁴⁰ *Op.cit.*, p. 197.

⁴¹ Lane, *op.cit.*, p. 2010.

⁴² Al-Kātib, Muḥammad Tariq, *Mawāzin al-Shi'r al-'Arabi' bi Isti'māl al-Arqām al-Thunā'iyyah*. Baghdād: Maṭba'at Maṣlaḥat al-Mawānī' al-'Irāqīyyah, 1971, p. 65.

⁴³ Goldziher, *op.cit.*, p. 197.

⁴⁴ Goldziher, *op.cit.*, pp. 157 - 158.

concentrates his thoughts on the subject of his speech, the concepts and words just flow from his mouth as if by themselves.⁴⁵ In other words, they can speak by improvisation.

CONCLUSION

The discussion of the theme of the *Shu'ūbī* polemic, in fact, plays an important role in the production of works particularly on the disgrace of the Arabs and *Shu'ūbī* virtues. Among the works on this type are *Fadl al-'Ajam 'alā al-'Arab wa Iftikhāruhā*, *Kitāb al-Mathālib al-Ṣaghīr*, *Kitāb al-Mathālib al-Kabīr*, *al-Maydān fī al-Mathālib*, *Kitāb al-Mathālib*, *Kitāb Luṣūṣ al-'Arab*, *Ad'iyā' al-'Arab* and *Faḍā'il al-Fāris*. Meanwhile the pro-Arabs also produced many works on Arab virtues. Among them are *Kitāb al-Bayān wa al-Tabyīn* and *Kitāb al-'Arab* or *al-Radd 'alā al-Shu'ūbiyyah*. This production of works eventually led to knowledge development particularly during the period of Abbasid.

⁴⁵ Abū 'Uthmān 'Amr bin Baḥr Al-Jāhīz, vol. 3, p. 28; I. Goldziher, 1967, vol. 1, p. 160.