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Arabic: The Language of Arts, Civilization and Cultural Exchange

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Abstract

Language is the lifeblood of a culture's soul, a vessel of wisdom and memory. Like a mother cradling her infant, it carries, nurtures, and feeds the essence of people: their hopes, histories, and dreams across generations. Just as a mother nourishes her child, she passes down the invisible threads of heritage, woven from the memories and customs of her family. In this quiet exchange, differences arise, influences blend, and new cultural bonds are born; connecting not only to the family but to the wider universe, shaped by both mother and father, or sometimes, by a mother alone. Among the world's major languages, Arabic holds a unique position as Buraq of civilization, the 'umbilical cord' of cultural exchange, and a unifying force across diverse societies. In Islamic tradition, 'Buraq' is the heavenly steed entrusted to Angel Gabriel, who carries Prophet Muhammed (SWA) to the heavens during the Night Journey and Ascension. This paper journeys through the historical, intellectual, and artistic landscapes of the Arabic world, tracing its influence from the Islamic Golden Age to the modern era. It captures the role of the Arabic language in shaping scientific, inquiry, literature, and universal diplomacy, while also addressing the challenges and opportunities it faces in contemporary world fraught with crises and threats to its existence. Arabic stands firm not only as a living medium of artistic and scholarly expression, ensuring its enduring legacy for generation to come.

Keywords: Akshayapatra, Calligraphy, Renaissance, Mahjar, Pen League

1. Introduction

Culture preserves the gifted values, traditions and artistic expressions of humanity. Various civilizations and diverse cultural aspects, on the other hand, reflect the experimental, scientific, philosophical and intellectual pursuits that shape human progress. Language, as the fundamental medium of interaction, forms the foundation upon which these concepts are

constructed for communication. Among the world's languages, Arabic stands as a manifestation to the power of linguistic heritage, serving as a unifying force across diverse communities¹ and a medium for the knowledge dissemination.

¹ Diverse communities are social groups made up of people who differ from one another in terms of characteristics such as ethnicity, religion, language, culture, traditions, socioeconomic background but interact with each other.

Arabic is one the most widely spoken languages, with more than 400 million native speakers and a significant global presence. It is the liturgical language for over 1.8 billion Muslims worldwide, reinforcing its role in religious, intellectual and cultural traditions (Suleiman, 2003). Arabic's significance is further reflected its status as one of the six official languages of the United Nations (Al-Jallad,² 2020). The co-existence of numerous dialects, alongside Classical Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic, underscores its adaptability while maintain historical continuity.

The historical prominence is deeply intertwined with the intellectual and cultural flourishing of the Islamic Golden Age, a period during which it became the principal language of scholarship (Gutas,³ 1998). From science and medicine to philosophy art and literature Arabic has long shaped the course of human knowledge, leaving its mark on civilisations across the world. The Arab film industry carries the voice of rich and diverse heritage⁴. Born in the streets of Cairo, once called the Hollywood of the East, it soon spread across the Arab world, capturing stories of love struggle and identity. From timeless Egyptian classics to bold, modern films from Lebanon, Palestine and Morocco, Arab cinema weaves tales that echo the hopes and histories of its people. Today, with rising talents and celebrated film festivals, it continues to bridge past and present, offering the world a window into the soul of Arab culture. This paper explores the many ways this rich

language has touched history and continues to inspire modern society.

2. Arabic and Its Civilisational Legacy

The role of Arabic in shaping human civilisation shines brightest its service as vessel for scholarship and intellectual light, much like the Akshayapatra⁵ – the mythical vessel in Indian lore, translated by Krisari Mohan Ganguli (1883-1896)-gifted by Lord Krishna which granted endless sustenance to those who sought it Dutt M.N. (1895). During the Middle Ages, Arabic became most evident in its function as medium of scholarship and intellectual progress. During the Middle Ages, Arabic became the bridge that preserved and enriched the wisdom of Greek, Persian Mesopotamian and Indian traditions, carrying their voices into new lands and centuries. The translation movement, particularly in Baghdad's Bayt al-Hikma,⁶ was pivotal in spreading scientific and philosophical literary works into Arabic, ensuring their survival and development (Abu al-Hasan, 'Ali b.al-Husayn (1968)⁷.

As we discuss the scholarly contributions, we begin

² Ahmad Al-Jallad is Jordanian-American philologist, epigraphist and historian of the Arabic language. He is currently the 'Sofia Chair in Arabic Studies' at Ohio State University (and formerly at Leiden University), and earned his Ph.D. in Semitic Philology from Harvard in 2012.

³ Dimitric Gutas is a well-known American scholar of Arabic and Islamic history, especially known for his work on medieval philosophy and the translation movement in Islamic Golden Age.

⁴ Diverse heritage is a collection of tribal, cultural, religious and communal artistic traditions passed down through generations, reflecting the unique identity of each community.

⁵ Akshayapatra is a mythical vessel from Indian epic, Mahabharata, said to have been gifted by Lord Krishna to the Pandavas during their exile. It was a miraculous pot that provided an endless supply of food, ensuring that no one went hungry. The term Akshayapatra literally means 'inexhaustible vessel' in Sanskrit.

⁶ Bayt al-Hikma (House of Wisdom) was a famous Centre of Learning established in Baghdad during the Abbasid Caliphate in the 9th century. It served as a great library, translation Centre, and academy where scholars from different cultures and faiths gathered to translate, preserve and expand knowledge from Greek, Persian, Indian and other civilizations.

⁷ Al- Mas'udi, Abu al-Hasan 'Ali b.al-Husayn (c.896-956CE) was renowned Arab historian, geographer and traveler, often called the 'Herodotus of the Arabs' for his wide-ranging historical and cultural account.

with Al-Khwarizmi,⁸ the father of Algebra; Ibn Sina⁹ (Avicenna), the pioneer in medicine and philosophy; the pathfinder of Indian Jyotisha Shastra (astronomy); and Al-Razi¹⁰ (Rhazes), the father of early clinical medicine, all of whom made groundbreaking contributions in fields such as mathematics, physics, medicine and chemistry. With an authentic perspective, it can be said that their works and experiences, originally written in Arabic, were later translated into classical languages such as Sanskrit and Latin, leaving a lasting impact on the European Renaissance. World-renowned historians like Roger M.A. Allen,¹¹ Muhsin J.al-Musawi,¹² James E. Montgomery,¹³ D.S. Richards,¹⁴

Thomas Bauer¹⁵ and Geert Jan van Gelder¹⁶ have conveyed their surveys in various writing, documenting the rich literary and intellectual heritage of Arabic culture. Profound Arab philosophers like Al-Farabi and Ibn Rushd were deeply enriched by Greek thought, authoring interpretations on Aristotle that shaped medieval European streams of intellectual inquiry.

Far more than its academic value, Arabic carries sacred weight as the tongue of the Qur'an. In contrast to other religious scriptures that have experienced translations and alterations, the Qur'an's Arabic text endures unchanged, safeguarding its linguistic and spiritual sanctity. This enduring constancy has shaped a shared religious and linguistic identity within Muslim societies across centuries. The eloquence and layered beauty of Qur'anic Arabic have left a lasting imprint upon Arabic literature, poetry and calligraphy, further anchoring the language at the heart of cultural and intellectual heritage.

3. The Language of Pen: Arabic's Radiance in Arts and Letters

Arabic has historically served as a language of literary and heritage, offering masterpieces that continue to engage audiences around the world. Classical works such as One Thousand and One Nights (Alf Layla wa Layla)¹⁷ reflect the depth of Arabic storytelling, weaving together folktales, myths and historical accounts. The well-written English translation by Edward William Lane is largely faithful and understandable, much like the original version of 'Alf

⁸ Al-Khawarizmi (c. 780 - c. 850 CE): A pioneering Persian Mathematician, astronomer and geographer of the early Abbasid period. His most famous work is Kitab al-Mukhtasar fi Hisab al-Jabr wal-Muqabala (The Compendious Book on Calculation by Completion and Balancing)

⁹ Ibn Sina (980 – 1037 CE): Author of most celebrated works, Al-Qanun fi al-Tibb (The Canon of Medicine) and Kitab al-Shifa (The Book of Healing) is a renowned Persian polymath, philosopher and physician of Islamic Golden Age.

¹⁰ Al-Razi (865 – 952 CE), A well-known Persian Chemist, physician and philosopher. He best known for his works, Kitab al-Hawi fi al-Tib (Authoritative reference of Medicine) and Kitab al Mansuri (The book for Al-Masur – The book was written as tribute to al-Mansur ibn Ishaq, the Persian ruler of that time. It consists of ten major chapters covering practical aspect of medicine).

¹¹ Roger M.A. Allen (b.1942) is a prominent British scholar, critic and translator specializing in Arabic literature. He is considered one of the leading figures in modern Arabic literary studies in the English-speaking world.

¹² Muhsin Jassim Al-Musawi is a distinguished Iraqi scholar, literary critic and professor of Arabic and comparative literature. He is widely accepted for his expertise in classical and modern Arabic literature, cultural history and the global connection of Arabic literary tradition.

¹³ James E. Montgomery is a leading British scholar of classical Arabic literature and thought. He currently serves as Sir Thomas Adam's Professor of Arabic at the University of Cambridge.

¹⁴ David Samuel Richards was a respected British historian, translator and scholar of classical Arabic historiography.

¹⁵ Thomas Bauer is a well-known German scholar and professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Münster, Germany.

¹⁶ Geert Jan van Gelder (b.1947) is a well-known Dutch scholar and emeritus Laudian professor of Arabic at the University of Oxford (1998-2012), following a long tenure at the University of Groningen.

¹⁷ Alf Layla Wa Layla is a famous collection of Middle Eastern folktales and moral stories, as it an anthology drawn from Persian, Arabic, Indian and Iraqi oral traditions.

Layla wa Layla, and I recommend it for future reference (Edward William Lane 1839-1841). The renowned verses of Al-Mutanabbi,¹⁸ the reflective writings of Abu al- 'Ala al-Ma'arri¹⁹ and the tragic romance of Layla and Majnun²⁰ demonstrate the breadth and versatility of Arabic literature (James Atkinson, 1836). Al-Ma'arri's work 'Risala al-Gufran, is often considered remarkably close in theme to Dante's famous Divine Comedy. A reliable English translation of this work is available in this Library of Arabic Literature series, translated by Geert Jan van Gelder and Gregor Scholer and published by New York University Press (Geert Jan van Gelder 2013). Beyond its religious framework, Qur'anic stories, such as those of Adam and Eve, Musa (Moses) and his wife, and Yusuf (Joseph) and Zulaika have profoundly shaped the portrayal of husband-wife relationship as ideal examples within popular culture. These narratives have often played a vital role in shaping social values and drawing people toward the teachings of the Qur'an and Islam.

4. Arabic and its Role in Cross-Cultural Dialogue

Arabic has historically functioned as a link connecting civilizations, fostering cross-cultural dialogue and

intellectual exchange. The translation movement of Islamic Golden Age played a pivotal role in pursuing Greek, Persian and Indian knowledge to Europe, leaving a profound impact on Renaissance and shaping Western thought.

In the modern era, Arabic literature experienced a new phase of growth through emergence of 'Mahjar literature'²¹ – the writings of Arab migrants who settled in the Americas and Europe (Talukdar, Mofidul Alom -1922). Many writers from countries such as Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq were forced to leave their homelands due to political unrest, social challenges and personal hardship, carrying with them little more than their talent and unwavering commitment to their craft. Despite adversity, their steadfast faith in the power of writing and thought enabled them to build a vibrant world of literature abroad.

Notable figures in this movement include Khalil Gibran (1883-1931), Ameen Rihani (1876-1940), Mikhail Naimy (1889-1988), Etel Adnan (1925-2021), Rabih Al-meddine (b.1959) and Hanan al-Shaykh (b.1945) from Lebanon all of whom made remarkable contributions to Arabic and world literature. Their works continue to reflect themes of exile, identity spirituality and the human condition, enriching the broader tapestry of Arabic literary heritage (Ameen Fares Rihani -1920).

In the contemporary global landscape, Arabic media platforms emerge as vibrant voices connecting cultures and sharing narratives through the world. Social networks including Sky News Arabia (a UAE-UK collaboration), Al Jazeera (Qatar), Al Arabiya (MBC Group, Saudi Arabia), Asharq News (Saudi Arabia) and TRT Arabic (Turkey) serve not simply as new outlets but as channels of global awareness and cultural

¹⁸ Abu al-Tayyib Ahmad ibn al-Husayn al-Mutanabbi (915-965 CE), one of the most celebrated poets in Jahiliya period known for his eloquent language, profound self-confidence and inclusive statements on power and society. The poet himself was given the title 'al-Mutanabbi' literally means 'the claimant of prophecy'; he once falsely claimed to be a prophet, during his youth in Syria around the 933 CE.

¹⁹ Abu al-'Ala al- Ma'arri (973-1957 CE) was a famous Syrian poet, philosopher and critic. His major works, *Luzum Ma La Yalzam* and *Risala al-Ghufran*.

²⁰ Layla Wa Majun is one of the Arab World's most timeless classical story. It was first tolled by Qays ibn al-Mala-wah, 7th century Arab poet whose yearning for his beloved named Layla earned him the name 'Majnun Layla', mad for Layla. His deep touched verse captured the pain of unful-filled love and the same story became a lasting part of Arabic, Persian and later, it was retold by Nizami Ganjavi, the great Persian of the 12 centuries.

²¹ Mahjar literature refers to the body of Arabic literary works produced by Arab writers who emigrated, mainly to North and South America, during 19th and early 20th centuries. The Arabic term Mahjar means 'place of emigration'.

exchange. In parallel, dynamic digital platforms like AJ+Arabic (Qatar) and Raseef22 (Lebanon-based) amplify varied viewpoints, illuminating social realities, human narratives and the shared challenges of modern life. Complementary to these efforts are Arabic literary journals and presses, steadfast in preserving the enduring literary essence and intellectual richness of the Arabic language. Moreover, the growing enthusiasm for Arabic language studies within Western universities signals to the world's increasing appreciation for its cultural depth and geopolitical importance. These academic initiatives serving as subtle pathways of understanding, actively strengthen connections between diverse societies and meaningful dialogue, empathy and mutual discovery.

When Arabic new channels like Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya and Sky Arabia began broadcasting, they didn't just change how news was delivered; they introduced new concepts and words as well. One such idea is what English calls "infotainment", blending information and entertainment into a single experience. Since Arabic had no exact word for this, modern media has often borrowed the English term. However, a fitting Arabic expression could be 'Ma'lumsiliyya' (معلوميّية), combining information (معلومة) and entertainment (سليّة). This reflects how Arabic media continues to evolve trends to engage contemporary audiences.

5. Challenges and Future Prospects

In recent times, a deliberate climate of fear, orchestrated by narrow nationalist movements and certain ideological agencies has sought to burden the Arabic language with unjust associations, branding it as a language of extremism. Such regrettable narratives not only distort reality but also attempt to diminish a language that has for centuries, been a vessel of philosophy, science, art and human wisdom. These misguided efforts serve as reminders of the enduring need to protect the dignity of languages and the cultures

they represent.

Although Arabic carries a remarkable history and continues to hold global importance, it faces several modern-day challenges. The wide variety of regional dialects adds colour and richness to the language, but sometimes makes communication between different Arabic speaking communities more difficult. Even so, Modern Standard Arabic remains the shared language for education, media and official communication, helping to keep a sense of unity across the Arabic-speaking world²².

6. Conclusion

Arabic has long served as a thread that binds together diverse cultures, peoples, and histories. It carries within its words the stories of ancient wisdom, the verses of great poets and the thoughts of philosophers who shaped civilisations. From the libraries of the Islamic Golden Age to the pages of modern novels and digital platforms, Arabic continues to speak with a voice both ancient and new.

Though it faces the pressures of modern life; from regional dialect divides to the fast-moving world of technology – Arabic adapts, finding new homes in artificial intelligence, online education and global media. It remains not only a language of faith, belief and tradition but also a living link for knowledge, art and understanding between nations. As the critic Edward W. Said²³ beautifully wrote: "No one today is purely on thing" (Edward W. Said -1993). Languages like Arabic remind us of this; carrying within them centuries of borrowed, shared and reinvented meaning. It stands today as a voice of resilience and renewal, safeguarding a legacy for generations yet to come.

²² The Arabic-speaking world includes 22 countries across West Asia, North Africa, and parts of East Africa, where Arabic is an official or widely spoken language.

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²⁴ Edward W. Said (1935) was a renowned Palestinian-American literary critic, theorist and public intellectual. He is known for his challenging work, *Orientalism* (1978).