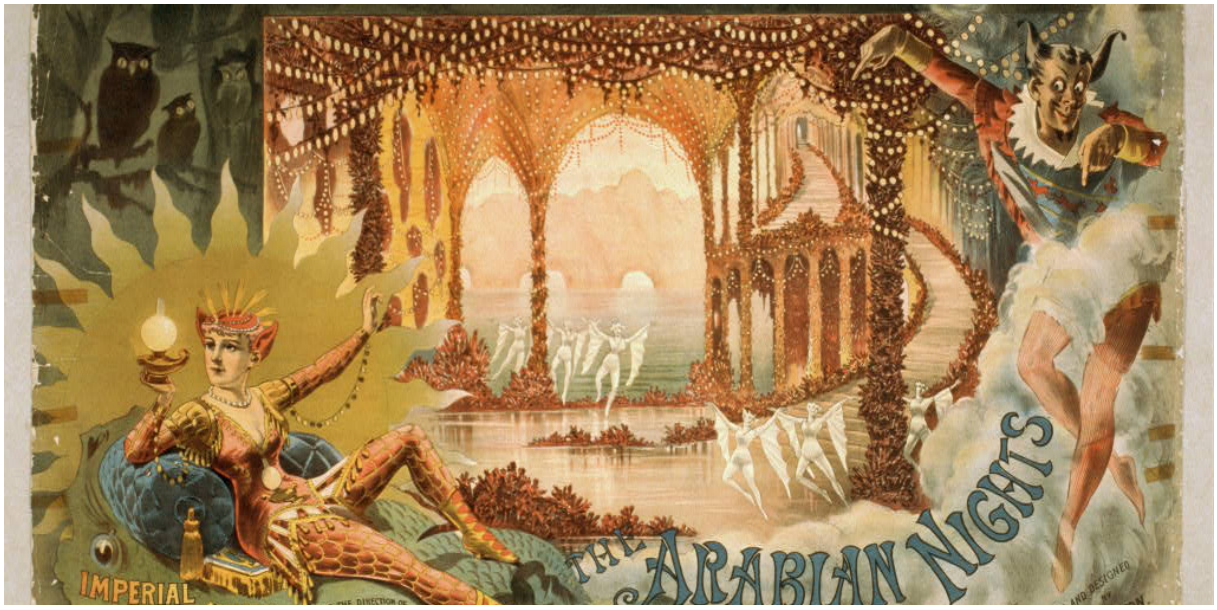

Being an adīb among strangers: A reflection from the threshold

Posted on November 28, 2025 by Mwaffaq Al-Hajjar [vc_row][vc_column][vc_column_text css=””]When I first left my family home, my father offered me a sentence that travelled with me more faithfully than any suitcase: Ya gharīb kūn adīb – ‘O stranger, be adīb.’

I received it then as a piece of etiquette, a reminder to behave, to carry myself tactfully in a place that was not mine. Only later did I realise that the proverb was not advising me how to behave, but how to become.

In Arabic, gharīb is not just the foreigner. It is the strange, the unfamiliar, the one whose presence marks a shift in the order of things. Gharīb also shares roots with words like Gharb, Ghurba, and Gharāba (The West, Exile, and Strangeness). In this sense the stranger is not only an outsider; they are a disturber of the sedimented norms of self and space. To be gharīb is to arrive already under interpretation – the moment the stranger appears, their presence is read, and decoded through cultural expectations long before they reveal anything of themselves.

The concept of adīb (someone with adab) is even more unstable. In today's Arabic it means writer, intellectual, or sometimes simply 'literary person'. But before this academic terminology, adab was a capacious, travelling concept: comportment, ethics, worldliness, humanistic education, self-formation, relational knowledge, and the arts that allow one mind to gesture toward another. It was, to borrow from Al-Akfani (d. 749/1348), a practice that 'discloses the intentions in the mind of one person to another,' whether near or far. adab was a process of interpreting self and other.

Standing on that threshold between home and elsewhere, I did not know any of this. I simply became the stranger and found myself navigating my identity and my otherness through the language of adab. Hence, adab as literature became my surviving anchor and with it, I managed to navigate my exiled self. From a story of my grandmother (which also appears in One Thousand- and One-Nights aka The Arabian Nights) – the story of Sinbad – I built my point of departure: Departing one structure to discover another. That journey led me later to pursue a Master's in Comparative Literature, where I worked on the Kitāb al-Mawāqif of Muḥammad b, Abd al-Jabbār al-Niffarī. There, I found a masterpiece of adab, a Sufi text (as academically described) that works on a spatial language and produces a space to live in – an ontological experience of finding home, or of fleeing it towards a more complicated experience.

This experience threw me into more traditional texts of Arabic Literature and Humanities, and I found myself reading texts that cross borders and genres all the time, texts before which literary theory stands short. And that led me to question the concept.

With modernity, adab seems to me to have lost its elasticity and become 'literature', a smaller space compared to the vast one it once occupied. This shrinking was not accidental. Colonial modernity affected the intellectual Arab scene and caused (directly and indirectly) concepts to be translated, trimmed and made to fit an already fabricated architecture of knowledge. The adīb – once a figure of worldly formation – became a literary specialist. The gharīb – once a marker of difference within a cultural world – became the migrant, the refugee, the non-European Other.

The gharīb therefore arrived in a place organised by someone else's

concepts – world literature, canon, genre, theory – and must justify their presence using the very vocabulary that renders them minor. adab became the gharīb as it faced and continues to face the problematic reality of the ‘world literature’ concept.

I often return to the question Hamid Dabashi raises – ‘where is world literature?’ Because, before it is a geographical problem, it is a conceptual one. Where do we place works like Kitāb al-Hayawān when the categorical tools available -novel, philosophy, poetry, mysticism – do not recognise their modes of thinking? Such works resist generic classification because they move across multiple intellectual traditions at once. How, then, might we define the genre of Kitāb al-Hayawān, or determine the scholarly framework through which it should be studied?

The only way these texts enter ‘world literature’ is through translation into the western grammar of the literary. But the point is not to add more shelves to the world literature warehouse. The point, as Dabashi suggests, is to liberate the worlds that exist outside it – worlds whose intellectual traditions were suffocated by the universal claim of European terms. The liberation would allow these traditions and the scholars to rediscover their own concepts, and modes of reading of their epistemology to present an alternative reality for the literary theory.

This is where adab returns to me not as a nostalgic recovery but as a decolonial possibility. Not the museumified adab of university syllabi, not the moralistic adab of nineteenth-century reformers, but adab as a relational, ethical, aesthetic mode of being in the world – a way of thinking that insists on behaviour, taste, language, and imagination as intertwined practices.

I am a writer, a researcher, a refugee, an outsider.

I cannot separate my scholarly questions from the conditions of estrangement that shape them.

Yet, adab calls me to think from the gap between languages, traditions, and systems of knowledge; to inhabit the instability rather than escape it.

It is a refusal of the passive role assigned to ‘non-Western literature’ and,

instead, an insistence on the conceptual agency of our own traditions.

Perhaps this is why my father's sentence still follows me. It was not advice about manners after all. It was an epistemology of movement; a pedagogy for travelling through worlds that do not expect you; a reminder that concepts, like people, migrate – and that some meanings must be carried by hand, protected by untranslatability.

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Image: The Arabian nights © Courier Company [1888] Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.[/vc_column_text][/vc_column][/vc_row][vc_row][vc_column][vc_toggle title="Reading group event details" open="true" css=""]Date: 7th November 2025
Title: A genealogy of adab and the urge to question world literature with Mwaffaq Al-Hajjar
Speaker: Mwaffaq Al-Hajjar
Chair: María Jose Recalde-Vela
Minutes by: Nadeen Dakkak[/vc_toggle][vc_toggle title="Selected minutes" css=""]

Mwaffaq:

> This presentation is an attempt to think through the concept of *adab*. I started thinking of this concept two years ago during a conversation with a friend who was working on Al-Jahiz's *Kitab al-Hayawan* (The Book of Animals). We were thinking of the genre of the book, and going from one idea to another, we realized that there was so much to say about the concept of *adab*.
>
> When I first left my home country and became a refugee, my father gave me a piece of advice in the form of a popular Arabic proverb which has much significance for Arabic speakers. He told me, '*ya gharib kun adib*.' Because I was already familiar with this proverb which asks strangers or foreigners or

immigrants to be at their best behaviour in their host country, I did not really overthink it. It's only recently when I started deconstructing the concept of *adab* that I realized that we could think of this proverb as advocating a tool of knowledge production once we read *adib*, which derives from *adab*, differently.

Adib in modern Arabic is a writer, an intellectual, a scholar, or a master of literature, but the term also has to do with behaviour or manners. In informal Arabic, we use *adab* more to mean behaviour and the system of manners. It is interesting to note that despite this meaning in informal Arabic, the term *adab* is still used to reference literature in formal Arabic.

I start my discussion with the work of Egyptian scholar Iman Farag who states that '*adab* – [is] the paideia of Arab Muslims' (Farag, 'Private Lives, Public Affairs: The Uses of adab 2001 p.93). There is also the work of George Makdisi, which is central to anyone working on *adab* as a concept. For me, however, the approach that Makdisi takes in his book, *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West*, is still Eurocentric for trying to prove a point that there is humanism in Islam before Western Renaissance. I believe that there are always encounters between civilizations, so this is not the point for me, bur rather how *adab* was perceived and what its role was.

The definition of *adab* by Al-Akfani from the 14th century, as cited in Makdisi's book, shows us that it was common sense to see *adab* as related to human sciences or sciences in general. To be a scholar, you have to be an *adib*. Another useful recent definition is by Armando Salvatore who sees '*adab* as a civilising process—a non-divine source of norms guiding human interaction.' This definition reflects well the writing of Al-Jahiz.

Over time, however, the meaning of *adab* changed. For modern scholars, *adab* means literature. It has become just a mirror to the concept of literature. To understand why this happened, we need to go back to Nahda times, and we need to talk about Egypt's history and the Napoleonic invasion in the late 18th

century. The 19th century marked the last era in which *adab* was used as a system of knowledge production. Arab scholars brought Western paradigms of civilization and tried to implement them in accordance with what fits with Arab societies.

Rifa'a Al-Tahtawi, for example, linked *adab* with French ideals of equality. In his book, *Manahij Al-Albab fi Mabahij Al-Adab Al-'Asriyya*, he coined for the first time the term 'al-adab al-'asriyya' with which he meant modern *adab*. This signified the adaptation of *adab* to colonial modernity. He used the plural term to reflect literature from the West. This adaptation marked the decline of Arab humanities. It also marked the rise of modern nation states and the end of Arab Islamic humanism as it was known.

Now we come to the world literature problem. Every concept has a history, but the becoming or transformation of *adab* was not only a natural transformation. The evolution of *adab* was shaped by external forces, namely colonial and intellectual pressures that reshaped and confined it to the literary realm.

For David Damrosch, world literature is a mode of reading, and a book that circulates enough beyond its borders is world literature. He claims that it is not a fixed canon, but rather a canon that always expands. However, the problem when we talk about circulation is that we are confronted by a number of questions: Who is circulating a work of literature? What is the direction we are talking about? Are there two directions? Which speakers decide what is world literature? Does it have to circulate to the north? Until now, there is one direction of circulation at the centre of this conception of world literature.

Arab intellectuals redefined and reduced to adab to fit the European model of knowledge. Although adab exceeds literature, it was assimilated, and this resulted in challenges. Genre classification is one important problem. How do we read texts that do not fit genre expectations as they have been imported from the West? How do we classify a text that is not

novel, poetry or theatre, which is the case for many Arabic texts that are challenging to categorize in terms of genre?

Some research questions are:

If *adab* was once a way to connect knowledge, ethics, and literature, what do you think Arabs lost the most when that connection disappeared? And how did that affect the introduction of *adab* to the world?

What is lost is considering *adab* as a knowledge system, because we are no longer thinking through the Arabic language. We are thinking through an academic system, which offers one language or mode of producing knowledge, but it's not the only one.

Reader 1:

We've talked about the literary but I want to think of *adab* as a lived praxis. What's this element? How does *adab* translate as an actual praxis of lived experience?

Mwaffaq:

While studying for my master's thesis in Doha after having been displaced and living as a refugee for a few years, I was able to connect at a personal, intellectual and spiritual level with the text that I was working on: *Al-Mawaqif* by Muhammad Ibn 'Abdi Al-Jabbar Al-Niffari. It's a text that depicts encounters with God in an experimental form that includes a lot of physical movement and spatial thinking. Through this amazing language of Al-Niffari, I realized how much his spatial thinking resonates with my experience as a refugee. This is a philosophical 10th century text from which I could draw a lot of knowledge that

helped me understand my experience. And that is what I ended up studying, spatial thought in Al-Niffari's literary production, and I did this in conversation with modern humanism, rather than in isolation from it.

Reader 2:

How do you bring your work of creative writing and poetry with these questions you just raised in the talk, especially when we are expected to write in certain ways for academic publications?

Mwaffaq:

I think that, while of course not many journals would accept that you bring creative writing into academic writing, this is possible to do. I would really invite you to read Al-Jahiz's *Kitab al-Hayawan* (The Book of Animals), where he tells funny stories, but also writes on the nations of the world and people he learned from, and quotes his masters in what is akin to academic writing. If we look into our traditions of writing, like the works of Ibn Rushd or Ibn Khaldun, we see how their books are so different and heterogenous in their form, and this can inspire us to think differently about writing. We can integrate creative thinking and writing into knowledge production.

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