

Miserliness between Reality and Imagination in the Arab Literary Heritage

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Abstract

Miserliness is a social phenomenon known to peoples since ancient times. Although the Arab has long taken pride in generosity and liberality, he has never ceased to recognize miserliness and to satirize misers. Islamic law reinforced the value of generosity and condemned miserliness, which further strengthened the Arabs' attachment to liberality. However, the intermingling of different peoples within the Islamic state contributed to its spread. The Arab literary heritage has preserved numerous accounts, anecdotes, and poems about misers across the ages in books of reports and literary encyclopedias. Al-Jahiz, in particular, presented miserliness in a narrative form, especially from the perspective of realistic documentation. As for the corpus of Arabic poetry, it abounds in poetic images based on exaggeration, often supported with satirical humor.

Keywords: Miserliness – Reality – Imagination – Arab Literary Heritage

Introduction

A close observer of individual dispositions and the structure of social relations in Arab society inevitably encounters the value of generosity, which stands in opposition to miserliness. Throughout history, the Arabs have glorified generosity, considering it one of the fundamental virtues of their lives. They celebrated it in their poetry, and their diwans are replete with praise for the noble and generous. Yet, this reverence for generosity and its widespread presence in their lives does not negate the existence of miserliness, nor of misers who evade giving, withhold their wealth, thereby earning disgrace and exposing themselves to blame and satire.

Islam reinforced the value of generosity and condemned miserliness. The Qur'anic verses and the widely transmitted Prophetic traditions that warn against miserliness and encourage generosity were sufficient to curb this vice and reduce its presence in Arab society. Nevertheless, it soon resurfaced, particularly with the interaction of Muslims with Persian civilization and others in later periods, beginning from the Umayyad era through the Abbasid period and beyond. At that point, the forms of miserliness diversified until it became a deeply rooted trait in human nature. Perhaps the strongest motive behind it is the fear of poverty and need, which drove individuals to glorify money, cling to it, refrain from spending it, and hoard it.

In the face of the spread of this phenomenon, it was not surprising that it became a wide field for literary composition, storytelling, and poetic creation. Miserliness, in all its details and manifestations, permeated the domain of literary production. The depiction of the miser and the portrayal of miserliness in all its nuances combined reality with imagination in our ancient Arab heritage.

How is the phenomenon of miserliness represented in heritage literary works?

A. Miserliness Linguistically

Miserliness is the opposite of generosity and liberality. Its plural is misers. It is said: "He is miserly (bakhīl) or stingy (bākhil), and its plural is bukhalā'. Al-bakhhāl denotes one who is intensely miserly".¹

It is also said: "He was miserly with such-and-such," meaning he withheld what he possessed and did not give it.

In Lisān al-‘Arab: "al-bukhl and al-bakhal are two linguistic forms, both attested in recitation; al-bukhl and al-bukhūl are the opposites of generosity, and the plural is bukhalā'".²

B. Miserliness Terminologically

Al-Rāghib al-Aṣfahānī states: "Miserliness is withholding possessions from those who have a rightful claim to them; its opposite is generosity".³

Al-Jurjānī defines miserliness as: "withholding one's own wealth, whereas avarice (shuhh) is a man's miserliness regarding the wealth of others. It is also said: miserliness is abandoning altruism when there is need".⁴

C. Miserliness in the Qur'an and the Sunnah

Miserliness is considered among the reprehensible traits in the Qur'an, as in the Almighty's saying:

"And let not those who are miserly with what Allah has given them of His bounty think that it is good for them; rather, it is bad for them. They will be encircled by what they withheld on the Day of Resurrection. And to Allah belongs the inheritance of the heavens and the earth".⁵

Another indication of the abhorrence of miserliness is the Prophet's (peace be upon him) seeking refuge from it. He used to say in his supplication:

"O Allah, I seek refuge in You from laziness, cowardice, and miserliness," and al-Ḥarbī added: "and from senility," then both agreed on: "and from the trial of the Antichrist and the punishment of the grave."⁶

Thus, he dissociated himself from miserliness.

The mention of miserliness recurs in the Qur'an in many surahs, which indicates the strong condemnation and disparagement of this trait that brings loss to its possessor in both worlds.

Among the transmitted sayings condemning miserliness is that of Umm al-Banīn, the sister of 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz:

"If miserliness were a garment, I would not wear it; and if it were a path, I would not follow it."⁷

Miserliness in Books of Anecdotes (Akhhār Literature)

Miserliness was prominently present in books of anecdotes, as it constituted a social phenomenon that swept through the Arab-Islamic world, particularly during the Abbasid period. One of the main factors behind the spread of this phenomenon was the interaction between Arabs and non-Arabs, given that the Arab temperament traditionally rejected miserliness and celebrated generosity—a value further reinforced by Islam.

Hence, we find accounts of misers and their stories embedded within the folds of anecdotal literature and literary encyclopedias that gained prominence in later eras, such as the Mamluk period.

In *Al-Mustaṭraf fī kull fann mustaṭraf*, a work that gathers selections from the finest production of Arab intellectuals—what refines the soul and delights the mind—al-Abshīhī carefully selected elegant pieces from various disciplines, drawing upon the Qur'an and the Prophetic tradition. The book comprises eighty-four chapters covering diverse arts and stands as one of the most significant literary encyclopedias that flourished in the 9th century AH.

Miserliness is discussed in its thirty-fourth chapter, beginning with Qur'anic citations followed by Prophetic traditions, and then mentioning notable Arab misers such as "al-Ḥuṭay'a, Ḥumayd al-Arqaṭ, Abū al-Aswad al-Du'alī, and Khālīd ibn Ṣafwān."⁸

The text openly names individuals, exposing prominent misers and citing their sayings. Among the leading figures of miserliness is Muḥammad ibn al-Jahm, who said:

"I wish that ten jurists, ten orators, and ten poets would conspire to defame me and make my insult easy, so that it would spread across the horizons, and no hopeful person would extend hope toward me nor aspire to my generosity."⁹

In *Al-'Iqd al-Farīd* by Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, one of the foundational works of Arabic literature, the seventh volume includes accounts of miserliness and misers in its third book, entitled *al-Jumānah al-Thānīyah fī al-Mutanabbihīn wa al-Mamrūrīn wa al-Bukhalā' wa al-Ṭufayliyyīn*. This section presents various accounts and notable figures, including the epistle of Sahl ibn Hārūn on miserliness, in which he justifies his actions and principles:

"You reproached me for mending my sandals and patching my garment, while I maintain that a mended sandal is more durable, stronger, and closer to asceticism; that patching reflects prudence, whereas extravagance leads to waste, and preservation lies in careful management. Indeed, the Messenger of God (peace be upon him) used to mend his sandals, patch his garment, and lick his fingers."¹⁰

Miserliness also appears in *Al-Imtā' wa al-Mu'ānasa* by Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī, which records forty nights of intellectual gatherings between al-Tawḥīdī and the minister Abū 'Abd Allāh al-'Āriḍ. In the thirty-first and thirty-second nights, within a discussion on hospitality and feeding guests, he cites the saying of Maymūn ibn Mihrān:

"Whoever visits a miser restrains his mount, dispenses with the need for a latrine, and is safe from overeating."¹¹

As for *Al-Maḥāsīn wa al-Masāwī'*, a work encompassing various aspects of human character and conduct juxtaposing virtues with their corresponding vices, it elevates generosity and condemns miserliness after citing Prophetic traditions. Among its examples is a man from Banū Hilāl ibn 'Āmir described as "more miserly than Mādir." This is because, after watering his camels, a small amount of water remained in the basin, so he defiled it and sealed the basin, thus earning the name Mādir.¹²

This reflects the extremity of his miserliness, as though this trait were an inherent disposition in human nature, independent of wealth or poverty.

Al-Ḥamdūnī devoted a section to miserliness in *al-Tadhkirah al-Ḥamdūniyyah* (Chapter Five of Volume Two), where he compares miserliness and generosity, recounting numerous anecdotes and humorous stories of misers. He also lists well-known figures of miserliness among the Arabs, such as al-Ḥuṭay'a, Khālīd ibn Ṣafwān, Abū al-Aswad al-Du'alī, al-Kindī, and Abū al-'Atāhiyah, contrasted with renowned figures of generosity like Ḥātim, Hirm, Ka'b ibn Māmāh, and 'Ubayd Allāh ibn al-'Abbās.

Accounts of generosity and miserliness vary between sayings and anecdotes. Among them is the statement attributed to some early scholars:

"Withholding what one possesses reflects a suspicion of the Creator."

And 'Alī (may God be pleased with him) said:

"Generosity is the guardian of honor."¹³

Among the amusing anecdotes about the people of Marw, who were known for their miserliness, is that when they traveled together, each would buy a piece of meat, tie it with a string, and place all the meat into a single pot. Each person would hold onto his own string, and when the pot was cooked, each would pull out his piece and eat it individually, while sharing only the broth.¹⁴

Miserliness in Classical Arabic Narrative

In this field, al-Jāḥiẓ stands as a unique figure through his book *Al-Bukhalā'* (The Misers). He did not merely transmit their anecdotes, stories, and poetry in a straightforward reportorial manner; rather, he presented them within a narrative framework characterized by rhythmic language, cultural depth, and a tone of irony. His aim was to convey his message indirectly, focusing particularly on the character of the miser as a tangible and realistic figure marked by diversity and multiplicity, reflecting the social and cultural variations of his environment.

These characters belong to different social strata: among the learned class, figures such as al-Aṣma'ī and Sahl ibn Hārūn; among literary figures, Abū al-Aswad al-Du'alī; and from the economic sphere, the figure of al-Thawrī.

Despite the predominantly narrative nature of *Al-Bukhalā'*, al-Jāḥiẓ often documented events through chains of narration, as in his statement:

"'Amr ibn Nahwī related to me, saying..."¹⁵

Al-Jāḥiẓ employed diverse methods and expressive forms in portraying misers, including narration, description, and dialogue, relying on the essential elements of storytelling. To convey emotional reactions, for instance, he made effective use of dialogue. One example is:

"I was informed by Ibrāhīm ibn Hānī, who said: I was with him one day when a vendor passed by calling out: 'Peaches! Peaches!' I said: 'Have peaches already arrived?' He replied: 'Yes, they have arrived, and we have had plenty of them.' His statement angered me, so I called the vendor and turned to Ibn al-Khārakī, saying: 'Woe to you! We have not even heard of them yet, and you claim to have plenty, while we know that our companions are more distinguished than you!'"¹⁶

Al-Jāḥiẓ succeeded in presenting a new image of miserliness through his characters. The miser is no longer merely someone who avoids spending; rather, he becomes a strategist who transforms miserliness into a successful way of life. He exploits every situation whether as host or guest to his advantage through cunning and ingenuity, employing deception and illusion. Paradoxically, the miser perceives no fault in his behavior; instead, he believes he is practicing a virtue, favoring reason over desire (the desire to spend).

Among the figures he mentions is al-Kindī, who devised innovative methods of frugality. For example, he would increase the rent of his house depending on the number of guests his tenant received, demonstrating his eagerness to exploit every opportunity for gain. In a humorous letter, he justified the rent increase by claiming that there was a pregnant woman in the house who might miscarry due to the enticing smells of cooking. Therefore, the tenant was

obliged to satisfy her craving, even if only with a small portion or a mere taste from the pot. This argument reveals the extent of his meticulousness in defending his interests, even at the expense of others. .¹⁷

Al-Jāḥiẓ thus transcended the portrayal of miserliness as mere humor or anecdote that provokes laughter or disgust. Instead, he transforms it into a reflection of daily reality and its details, expressing a perspective that shifts from simple narration to social criticism and psychological analysis of misers. In doing so, he made miserliness a social construct and a means of releasing social tension imposed by class disparity, turning it into a justification, a philosophy, and a means of self-assertion.

Works Devoted Specifically to Miserliness:

A. Kitāb al-Bukhalā' by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī

The title of this book coincides with that of al-Jāḥiẓ's work, although it does not share its narrative character. Rather, it constitutes a comprehensive compilation of all that pertains to miserliness, and may be regarded as an encyclopedic treatment of the subject. In it, al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī gathered scattered materials—accounts, poetry, and sayings related to this phenomenon.

He begins by citing reports from the Prophet (peace be upon him) concerning miserliness and his seeking refuge from it, thereby clarifying the position of Islamic law toward this trait. He then highlights the status of generosity and presents sayings of the early Muslims condemning miserliness. Furthermore, he recounts anecdotes about misers, mentioning their names, and the work abounds with figures renowned for miserliness such as Abū Nuwās, Juḥẓah, and Abū al-Aswad al-Du'alī.

In addition, the book includes names that frequently appear in earlier works of humor, anecdotes, and literary encyclopedias.

Through the historical method he adopts in composing this work, al-Baghdādī offers a systematic collection, arrangement, and classification of everything related to miserliness in the Arab environment. He appears as a historian inclined toward isnād (chains of transmission) and the authentication of reports, relying on exhortation and direct discouragement of miserliness rooted in a religious perspective. The figures of misers vary widely, reflecting different social strata: among them caliphs such as Abū Ja'far al-Manṣūr, wealthy individuals like Khālīd ibn Ṣafwān, and scholars such as al-Aṣma'ī and Abū al-Aswad al-Du'alī.

Various regions also became associated with miserliness, such as the people of Marw and Khurāsān. Among what is reported:

"It is narrated in a book about the people of Khurāsān, on the authority of al-Aṣma'ī, that he said: 'The most miserly of the people of Khurāsān are the people of Ṭūs. There was a village among them whose inhabitants became known for miserliness; they would not host a guest. When this reached one of their governors, he imposed upon them the duty of hospitality and ordered each man to fix a peg in the mosque in which he prayed. He said: "If a guest arrives, he may hang his whip or garment on any peg, and thus he will be hosted by the owner of the stake."¹⁸

Despite the diversity of accounts, poems, and materials related to miserliness, and although this work is uniquely devoted to the subject, al-Baghdādī does not adopt a satirical, analytical, or descriptive tone. Rather, his role is that of a compiler of reports and narrations

concerning miserliness and misers across past ages. This, however, does not diminish the value of the book, which remains a fundamental reference for any researcher in this field.

B. Ithāf al-Nubalā' bi-Akhbār wa Ash'ār al-Kuramā' wa al-Bukhalā'
This work was authored by al-Mubarrad Jamāl al-Dīn al-Dimashqī al-Ṣāliḥī al-Ḥanbalī, who died in 909 AH.

In it, the author brings together the two opposites: generosity and miserliness. He divides the book into five chapters. The first addresses Islam as a religion of giving and generosity; the second emphasizes that generosity is a form of faith and obedience; the third gathers various linguistic materials; while the fourth and fifth chapters present selections from classical Arabic poetry on generosity and miserliness.

The poetic material is largely confined to the pre-Islamic period, whose poets condemn miserliness, perhaps reflecting the deeply rooted nature of generosity in their character.

Miserliness in Arabic Poetry

The corpus of Arabic poetry abounds with expressions of pride in generosity and liberality, alongside the condemnation of miserliness and the public shaming of misers—those who refrain from giving and granting.

Although miserliness was recognized since the pre-Islamic period as a reprehensible trait, generosity was closely associated with hospitality and the honoring of guests. With the advent of Islam, generosity became deeply rooted in people's hearts, as it aligned with the teachings of Islamic law, which rejects miserliness. However, the interaction of Arabs with other peoples during the Islamic conquests and the expansion of the Islamic world contributed to the growth of this phenomenon. Some of the finest poetic expressions on miserliness emerged during the Abbasid period, where poets skillfully crafted caricature-like images of misers, portraying their most amusing situations, psychological states, and emotional reactions in short poetic fragments, often limited to two or three lines.

Among the most amusing depictions is that of Juḥẓah, who excelled in this field:

"I visited a companion who offered me
a crust of bread, his eyes brimming with tears.

He said: 'What do you desire?' I replied:

'A pinch of salt and another crust.'

He tore his collar, then struck me,
saying: 'This is the gravest sin!'"¹⁹

Ibn al-Rūmī exaggerates in describing one such miser:

"'Īsā is stingy even with himself,
though he is neither eternal nor immortal.

If he could, in his extreme parsimony,
he would breathe through only one nostril."²⁰

Another poet satirizes the bread offered by a miserly host:

"He brought us sour bread
resembling coins in its form;
its taste grinds the teeth,
and its roughness clings to the throat.
When we breathe at the table,

it flies into the air from its lightness;
so we all sit together,
restraining our breath out of fear of it."

As for Abū Nuwās, he vividly portrays the pots of al-Riqāshī, which remain perpetually clean:

"The pot of al-Riqāshī is proverbial
in everything—except that fire is never kindled beneath it.
It complains to neighboring pots when it turns, saying:
'For a year now, not a drop has touched me.'"

Here, exaggeration appears clearly in the depiction of miserliness, even to the extent of giving voice to inanimate objects (the pots), transforming them into expressive, complaining entities that convey a vivid sensory image.

Miserliness thus transcends mere direct condemnation and denunciation; it becomes a living, speaking image that evokes the details of daily life and amusing situations through linguistic forms enriched with satire. These poetic representations rely on exaggeration, exploring multiple angles to analyze the phenomenon and uncover its sources of irony.

Conclusion

Miserliness is the antithesis of generosity; it signifies withholding and restraint. Islamic law reinforced the value of generosity, which led to the condemnation of miserliness and misers. The Arab literary heritage is rich with numerous examples and varied depictions of misers, often associated with humor. Hardly any book of anecdotes or literary encyclopedia is devoid of their stories or poetic portrayals.

Al-Jāhīz presented a distinct image of misers, moving beyond mere transmission toward creative representation by crafting precise and objective caricature-like portrayals through a satirical narrative style.

Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī devoted an entire work to misers, compiling their accounts and poetry, adopting direct exhortation as a means to discourage this reprehensible trait.

In the corpus of Arabic poetry, the Abbasid trend reflects a continuous satire and condemnation of the miser. At the same time, it represents a literary outcome of this phenomenon, marked by a transformation in the depiction of situations and anecdotes of misers, framed within a tendency toward exaggeration and imaginative embellishment

¹Academy of the Arabic Language, *Al-Mu‘jam al-Wasīṭ*. (Egypt: Al-Shorouk International Library, 2004), p. 41.

² Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*. Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1990, Vol. 2, 1st ed., entry (b-kh-l), p. 30.

³ Al-Rāghib al-Aṣḥānī, *Abū al-Qāsim al-Ḥusayn ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Mufaḍḍal, Al-Mufradāt fī Gharīb al-Qur’ān*. Beirut: Dār al-Ma‘rifah, n.d., p. 38.

⁴ Muḥammad Ṣiddīq al-Mastāwī, *Ta‘rīfāt al-Jurjānī*. Cairo: Dār al-Faḍīlah, 2011, 1st ed., p. 39.

⁵ *Sūrat al-Nisā’*, verse 37.

- ⁶ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Al-Bukhalā'*, ed. Aḥmad Maṭlūb, Khadīja al-Ḥadīthī, and Aḥmad Nājī al-Qaysī, 1st ed., 1964, p. 28.
- ⁷ Aḥmad Shihāb al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Abshīhī, *Al-Mustaṭraf fī Kull Fann Mustazraf*, Vol. 1, Dār Maktabat al-Ḥayāt Publications, 1992, p. 252.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 252. ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 258.
- ⁹ Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Rabbih al-Andalusī, *Al-'Iqd al-Farīd*, ed. 'Abd al-Majīd al-Tarḥīnī, Vol. 7, Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1st ed., 1983, p. 224, Beirut–Lebanon.
- ¹⁰ Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī, *Al-Imtā' wa al-Mu'ānasah*, reviewed and edited by Haytham Khalīfah al-Ṭu'aymī, Vol. 1, Al-Maktabah al-'Aṣriyyah, Beirut–Lebanon, 2011, p. 293.
- ¹¹ Ibrāhīm ibn Muḥammad al-Bayhaqī, *Al-Maḥāsin wa al-Masāwi'*, ed. Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, Dār al-Ma'ārif, Cairo–Egypt, Vol. 1, p. 233.
- ¹² Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan ibn Muḥammad ibn 'Alī Ibn Ḥamdūn, *Al-Tadhkirah al-Ḥamdūniyyah*, ed. Iḥsān 'Abbās and Bakr 'Abbās, Vol. 2, Dār Ṣādir for Printing and Publishing, 1st ed., 1996, p. 260.
- ¹³ See the same source, p. 332.
- ¹⁴ Abū 'Uthmān 'Amr ibn al-Jāḥiẓ, *Al-Bukhalā'*, critically edited by Muḥammad 'Alī Abū al-'Abbās, Egyptian General Book Authority, Cairo, 1st ed., 2011, p. 64.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 100.
- ¹⁶ Abū Bakr Aḥmad ibn 'Alī ibn Thābit al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Al-Bukhalā'*, ed. Aḥmad Maṭlūb and Khadīja al-Ḥadīthī, Dār Ibn Ḥazm, Beirut, p. 210.
- ¹⁷ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, previous source, p. 61.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.187.
- ²⁰ Ibrāhīm al-Najjār, *Forgotten Abbasid Poets*, Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, Beirut, 1st ed., 1997, Part 2, p. 289.