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Al-Mutanabbî: Voice of the Abbasid Poetic Ideal

Mütenebbî ve Abbasî Şiir İdealinin Sesi

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Abstract: This book review presents Margaret Larkin's work, *Al-Mutanabbî: Voice of the Abbasid Poetic Ideal*. The work is a belles-lettres critique of a literary genre, the poetry of Al-Mutanabbî, which discusses the function of poetry in the Abbasid ideal. Larkin's interpretation of history, particularly medieval Islamic history, reveals the significance of contextualizing poetic activity in the 10th century Islamic court authority, as it is a disseminated media power and has an iconoclastic impact in the community, centralizing institutionalized power and supremacy. The author discusses several aspects of the poetic material in relation to the poet's life story, plight, and identity crisis, but also indicates its derivation from the political substructure, i.e., the Abbasid ideal. The political ideal is not a monolithic project; it requires an aesthetic vision and an attractive public image. According to Larkin's discernment, in achieving an Islamic empire discourse, the mobility of state power is grounded on the factor of charisma, the realm of which is poetry in the medieval Arab world. Larkin fills a scholarly gap in current literary studies.

Keywords: Arabic Language and Rhetoric, Classical Arabic Poetry, Literary Criticism, Discourse Analysis, Literary Tradition.

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Öz: Bu kitap incelemesi, Margaret Larkin'in *Al-Mutanabbî: Voice of the Abbasid Poetic Ideal* (Mütenebbî: Abbasî Şiir İdealinin Sesi) adlı eserini sunmaktadır. Bu çalışma, Abbasî idealinde şiirin işlevini tartışmak suretiyle Mütenebbî'yi belletristik (retorik ve edebî) bir açıdan kritik etmektedir. Larkin'in özellikle Orta Çağ İslam tarihine yönelik yorumu, 10. yüzyıl İslami saray otoritesinde şiirsel faaliyetin bağlamsallaştırılmasının önemini ortaya koymaktadır. Çünkü şiir, kitleselleşmiş bir medya gücüdür ve toplumda ikonoklastik bir etkiye sahip olup kurumsal güç ve üstünlüğü merkezleştirir. Yazar, şairin hayat hikayesi, mücadelesi ve kimlik kriziyle ilgili şiirsel malzemelerin birtakım yönlerini ele alırken, kökeninin politik bir alt yapıdan geldiği, yani Abbasî idealinden kaynaklandığını belirtmektedir. Politik ideal monolitik bir proje değildir; estetik bir vizyon ve çekici bir halk imajı gerektirir. Larkin'in tespitine göre, İslam imparatorluğu söylemini başarmak için devlet gücünün hareketliliği, Orta Çağ Arap dünyasında şiirin alanı olan karizma faktörüne dayanmaktadır. Larkin, mevcut edebî çalışmalarda bilimsel bir boşluğu dolduruyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Arap Dili ve Belagati, Klasik Arap Şiiri, Söylem Analizi, Edebiyat Geleneği, Edebiyat Tenkidi.

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İntihal-Plagiarism/Etik-Ethic: Bu kitap incelemesi, en az bir hakem tarafından incelenmiş ve intihal içermediği, araştırma ve yayın etiğine uyulduğu teyit edilmiştir. / This book review has been reviewed by at least one referee and it has been confirmed that it is plagiarism-free and complies with research and publication ethics. <https://dergipark.org.tr/pub/dergiabant/policy>

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Margaret Larkin. *Al-Mutanabbī: Voice of the Abbasid Poetic Ideal*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2008.

Margaret Larkin's book, *Al-Mutanabbī: Voice of the Abbasid Poetic Ideal*, is not merely a work of expertise on the subject of our book review but also presents to us a model that processes poetry in a historical context within a socio-political framework. The author examines the ranging anthology of al-Mutanabbī (915 – 23 September 965 CE) and links this anthology to its context and provides informative summaries and historical interpretations for certain poems.

In the first chapter, Larkin provides a general and useful overview of classical Arabic poetry and examines the circumstantial conditions in which the poet is involved. In this way, she reveals how his poetic personality characterizes the Arab hero, who is in complete combination with the tribal values of courage and generosity and a craftsman who fights against the infidels for the sake of Islam. It sounds comparable to the Greek ideal of Plato, *kalos kagathos*, the perfection of spiritual and corporal ideal in a human being.

The second part of the first chapter deals with the background, education, social and political sources of the poet and offers an insight for how al-Mutanabbī's poetic talent develops. In this part, Larkin interprets some of his first poems as reflecting his future poetic style. According to Larkin, these poems, which shed light on his future marginal poetic characteristics, are reflected readily in his challenges and revolutionary approaches to the classical motifs in the Arabic ode.

In this chapter, Larkin prefers not to delve into a thorough discussion of historiography concerning the poet's controversial problems about the biography of al-Mutanabbī. She seems rather silent and more hopeful in collecting her data from the existing poetic data of his *diwān* to reconstruct an established individual account of her own.

The second chapter is especially devoted to the ambitions of al-Mutanabbī which briefly talks about the adoption of his sobriquet *mutanabbi* (The Would-be Prophet). In addition, she mentions his participation in rebellions along with his imprisonment and subsequent release. It is noteworthy how all this is grimly depicted in her florescent elegance. He subsequently gained his fame as a blissful poet, which sets a sharp contrast at the end. The challenges al-Mutanabbī faced were versatile. He was sentenced to house arrest for not praising a governor during this period and was tried to prove his worth as a poet not only to get the governor to pardon him, but also to start his career. Towards the end of the chapter, the poet is analyzed in his state of depression wherein he finds his ideal court patron, Şayf al-Dawla, as though in a portrait of serendipity. In the third chapter, the author writes the last years of the poet in the presence of Şayf al-Dawla, which lays the focus of the main theme of the book. This part is crucial to assess his artistic profession in view of the author's method.

In the third chapter, the author describes the last years of the poet in the court of Şayf al-Dawla more vividly. Indeed, Larkin tells us that the poet spent the best nine years of his life in the court of Şayf al-Dawla. She notes that not only did the poet revere the sultan as a friendly interlocutor who appreciates the traditional Arab values but also a potential pan-Arab leader who protects the borders and expands the reign of his dominion and cares about the people. He furthermore catered to the intellectual and literary assemblages under his generous hosting. In the following sections of the chapter, the echoes of such traits resonate from the previous ones. The comments about the remaining years of al-Mutanabbī are written in such a story telling way that selections of his *diwān* are utilized by Larkin to expound the perspective of the poet and his life account. Arguably, it is this novel attempt of Larkin that contributed to the neglected connection in the scholarship of her early and modern colleagues because no classical or modern commentator of a *Diwān* anthology other than Larkin would prioritize the life story of a poet to his anthology in re-writing his individual history.

A great shift of paradigm occurs when the poet abandons the lofty status of artistry for a pragmatic concern of governance. The divergence between the loyal poet and the ideal sultan is replaced now with

a convergence of relationship between the pragmatic poet and his donor, the Egyptian governor, Kāfūr. Al-Mutanabbī's romantic attitude drastically converts into a professional setting and ironically this is where the nature of his antithetic and ambivalent nature of poetry transforms from farical to dramatic satires.

For Larkin, this would be an accurate grip of how al-Mutanabbī's question is solved. A psycho-analytic aspect unresolves the mystery: it is the uncontrolled greed of a deluded, romantic, distopian artist who requests a political, realistic and de facto vacancy from the authority. Such contraries are embodied in his arts of speech: resorting to the antithesis of Arabic morphology, i.e. *azdād*. Even though Kāfūr does not guarantee to al-Mutanabbī any position, he strategically concedes to his demand. In fact, the liberated Egyptian governor knows how to allure the poet for using him in the consolidation of his authority by advertising himself as a five-star poet in the Arab-Islamic world. However, such collaboration does not long last.

In 962 CE the poet cannot resist to a standby honorification. He decides to flee from Egypt to Kūfa and then to Baghdād, seeking asylum at the end. On this occasion, although the poet touches back with Şayf al-Dawla, he never returns to the court in Aleppo. Instead, upon an invitation, he visits Ibn Amid, a vassal to take him to Shiraz to meet the Buwayhid sultan Adud al-Dawla. In this context, Larkin tries to explain the poet's adventures in the context of one or two poems as an applied technique of her reconstructive poetic historiography. He composes his last poem and dedicates it to Adud al-Dawla. The poet on his way back to Syria, where he would be killed by Fatik, a thug who vowed to take revenge on the poet who had allegedly insulted him through a cursive poem because Fatik was a random commoner who stole his money and goods on a journey where he met the poet.

The fourth chapter reviews al-Mutanabbī's current critics and the author concludes that al-Mutanabbī was a poet with both admirers and critics. This admiration was, of course, based on his artistic production and the fact that it established a genre that influenced centuries later as the domain of Arab, Persian and Jewish poets. At the end, we find a helpful number of recommended readings and an accurate index.

Finally, we can acknowledge that the essence of Larkin's book is that the story of al-Mutanabbī, his life story and trials were all the semantical cues for his distinguished poems and they are contextualized in the English literature for the first time. The introductory part of the book presents a general trajectory of the history of Arabic poetry to the general reader; however, it leaves the most controversial questions unanswered about al-Mutanabbī.

The first of these is that it does not clarify the context regarding the lineage of al-Mutanabbī. As it is known, the classical and modern literature debates led to various speculations as to whether al-Mutanabbī really was a son of unknown ancestry or not. Furthermore, the question of how the lineage can be resolved is unexplained in the reconstructive work of Larkin. It would be appealing to see how her approach could resolve several other controversies. The poetic analysis in establishing a life account of the poet is an ample gap in the literature. Obviously, she sufficed to highlight these problems but disregarded them perhaps due to the limit of the work.

However, as she greatly details in her introduction, it is the poet's genealogical map that bears paramount importance for his acceptance not only for nobility issues but also because the authenticity of his poetry and the liability for praising the tribe depends on that condition. The author offers an entire picture of tribalism from the socio-anthropological terms and the role of poetry as early as the pre-Islamic community. Thus, the hypothesis whether the concepts of tribalism and estrangement in the medieval near east can be re-evaluated in light of the archaeology of textual studies seems to be fair. The relevant future research topics and their connection to how the social organizations and the political structures could be special key terms in understanding the establishment of power and charisma. Of course, a precise literary critique and psychoanalytic analysis of figures, institutions and a course of disciplines would then surface as the landmark of such research.

Although the topic of a romantic relationship between Şayf al-Dawla's sister, Khawla and al-Mutanabbî is an unaged and popular one, it never received its place in the cross-gender studies. and has been portrayed in modern Arab television and movie productions. Assuming its historical reality, one wonders how such an affair would apply for Larkin's history method.

Whether the poet's low rank might have rendered the affair might as a scandal or not is an entertaining question but the multiplicity of his addressing is more tempting. Semiotically speaking, the poet may have used the *nasîb* i.e. the beginning of the *qasîda* for a dual purpose is noteworthy. Is the reference to the sultan or his sister? Such an investigation can be an eye-opener one in appreciating the changing motifs in Arabic poetry and its possible contribution to the reconstruction of historiography.

Whether it is a film line between the Platonic love of the poet and the sultan or the ardent passion between him and the sultan's sister, it may seem dull in intellectual history at first glance, but mastering our understanding for a semiotic analysis would improve our knowledge of the *qasîda* blended in a *ghazal* form in the post-classical Arabic poetry authorship and its repercussions in appreciating history writing is altogether relevant.

This type of research furthers our knowledge of the conceptualization of basic terms such as authenticity and plagiarism in the sense of literary critique of the post-classical Arab world and age. The actual practice and theory source-criticism in the court tests and trials that al-Mutanabbî was challenged by constantly were driven by his competitive colleague and knight, Abû Firâs al-Ĥamdânî and his reputable companion, the grammarian Ibn Khalawayh. Of course, another issue is the murder of the poet. It seemed odd to many Arab historians that al-Mutanabbî was just assassinated by a thug. Several revisionists cast suspicions on this mysterious and unfortunate incident in addition to the attribution of the cursive poem by al-Mutanabbî. Larkin seems not to have a definite opinion about its authenticity. For many scholars, the style criticism of al-Mutanabbî can promise a fair answer to the questions about the authenticity of his certain poems but if the Larkin's reconstructive theory works, then how this will re-interpret for us the behaviour of the old voluminous commentaries on al-Mutanabbî's poetry? Thus, it's not only the matter of the reconstruction of his poetry but also re-inventing a history of the sheer magnitude commentaries on his life and his anthology.

In conclusion, except the above-mentioned certain reservations and the hypothetical contemplation, Larkin has introduced a new approach. While she introduced the poet to the general reader, she used her scholarly creative writing in depicting him while demonstrating a combination of his poetry and cavalry in his personality. In doing so, the author indicated that it was not only thanks to the poet's genius but also the socio-political reality that promoted the poet to the top of his career from an extremely low social status of unknown lineage. One might consider this as a "rags to riches" story. Larkin stressed that al-Mutanabbî's artistic popularity gained an upper hand while emphasizing his switches of career between poetry and bureaucracy. She facilitated the excelling character of al-Mutanabbî in the light of comparative literature, folklore and history. Nevertheless, the complex layered data semantics and multi-faceted sources of Greek philosophy, Persian metaphorism and Arabic patterns of poetry is the poet's individual feat. There is no reason not to suggest that Larkin's work should be incorporated with the assumptive statements above. It would build the gap in between the cross-cultural interactions for the global reader in general but particularly help discover the Arab renaissance as a natural growth of interplay between politicians, poets and philosophers.

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