

The Image of the Miser Between Al-Jahiz and Shakespeare

(A Comparative approach)

Dr. Manal Abdullah Al-Thaqafi

Taif University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Abstract

This study falls within the framework of comparative studies, and what we aim to achieve is to examine the image of the miser among East and the West, taking Al-Jahiz's "The Misers" and Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice" as models for our study. We attempt to approach them using some mechanisms of cultural criticism to reveal the underlying patterns rooted in the Arab and Western mindsets through which the image of the miser has been formed, using the comparative approach as a means to clarify the points of convergence and divergence between the two concepts.

Keywords: Image, Miser, Comparison, Al-Jahiz, Shakespeare.

1. INTRODUCTION

Comparing two creative works from different historical contexts and environments that both depict a model of the miser means examining the image of the miser in both works, transcending the nature of artistic construction; because the research will necessarily focus on a set of contexts that shaped the image of the (miser) -stereotypical if one may say- in the description of the other in both literatures (*Youssef Bakar, Khalil Al-Sheikh, 2008, p84-85*).

In order to uncover these contexts, we will rely on some mechanisms of cultural criticism that concern the study of implicit systems, which in turn converge in a certain period of time to draw a picture or a model of another party, whatever it may be, and present it in a manner agreed upon by the national mentality in a particular region.

Cultural criticism considers the text as "raw material used to explore certain patterns of narrative systems, ideological issues, and representation systems, and everything that can be abstracted from the text" (*Abdullah Al-Ghudami, 2014, p 17*).; therefore, we will attempt to trace the image of the miser in the two texts under study by paying attention to the contexts that shaped the image and revealing their reasons.

After reading the content of Al-Jahiz's " (The Misers), we find ourselves facing the image of the Persian miser and the Arab miser, and we will focus on the (Persian miser) as the other in our national literature, compared to the Jewish miser in Shakespeare's play "The Merchant of Venice," considering him the other in English literature.^(*)

In contrast, we will compare the image of the Englishman in front of the Arab in both literatures to clarify which one was more objective in discussing the self (national) versus the other.

2. THE IMAGE OF THE MISER (PERSIAN) IN AL-JAHIZ'S "THE MISERS"

2.1 The System of Political Conflicts / The System of Co-existence:

The Persians enjoyed a high status during the Abbasid era. "Since the Abbasids began their secret work in establishing their state, they relied on **the mawali "the servants"**, among whom were the Persians who contributed to the dissemination of **the secret call** in Khurasan, or those who served the Abbasid state in its existence.

After the Abbasids succeeded in establishing their state, these leaders occupied high and important positions in the hierarchy of power, including ministers, military leaders, governors, and supervisors of tax administration and state administrative and financial affairs

They had an advantage over the Arabs, which shows the Abbasids' trust in them and their support, highlighting them in the political, administrative, and military arenas." (*Sami Muhammad Al-Jafri, 2012, p 254-255*)

The rise of the Persians at the expense of the Arab nationalists undoubtedly brings us into a charged atmosphere where the Arab's jealousy of the Persian over the political position—which certainly means more control of the other over the state's tasks and executive powers—is evident. This implies that the Arab will be a second-class citizen, while the Persian will be first, even if he isn't a nationalist, in addition to the "**Shu'ubiya**"^(*) (anti-Arab sentiment) (*Shawqi Daif, 1960, p75.*) that spread during that period, along with the Persian's feeling of the greatness of his history and civilization compared to the history and civilization of the Arabs, which he despises.

This domination has motivated the Arab writer to project that jealousy and hatred in his literature into the Persian, portraying him as a greedy miser. However, we do not find this ego - despite the escalation of Persian political movement - describing the other in their miserliness to the point of injustice or oppression; rather, the description remains within the bounds of propriety and moderation.

We see both the Arab miser and the Persian miser, so the image of the Arab is not described as generous while the other is stingy; instead, the description of the miser is a human trait far removed from becoming a stereotype for the Persian among misers.

This opinion is supported by the statistical data presented by researcher "**Majida Mahmoud**" in her book "**Practical Approaches in Comparative Literature**," which states that "there were about forty misers among Arabs and Persians, including ten misers from the Persians and thirty from the Arabs." (*Magda Mahmoud, p 289*) This statistic confidently indicates that *Al-Jahiz* possesses the spirit of a tolerant writer, even though in his book "**Al-Bayan wa al-Tabyin**," he passionately defended the Arabs; for when discussing the issues of "**Shu'ubiya**," *Al-Jahiz fought against nationalism politically, but he was not hostile to foreign cultures, nor can anyone accuse him of bigotry, narrow-mindedness, or limited vision.*" (*Al-Taher Maki, 1997, p 22*) The texts likely affirm the validity of this opinion and the sincerity of this approach.

In the introduction to his book "*The Misers*," he says, "*I mentioned the wit of Al-Hizam, the arguments of Al-Kindi, the letter of Sahl ibn Harun, the words of Ibn Ghazwan, the sermon of Al-Harithi, and all the wonders that came to my mind from them. When they spoke of miserliness, they defined it as being frugal and stingy for the sake of economy, while they circled around prohibition and attributed it to prudence. They did not establish a basis for compassion and linked it to negligence, nor did they consider generosity as extravagance and*

preference as ignorance. They did not disdain praise, and their concern for blame was minimal. They did not belittle those who delighted in mention and found comfort in giving. They did not judge strength for those who do not lean towards praise nor deviate from blame. They did not use the harshness of life as an excuse for its ease or its sweetness as an excuse for its bitterness, nor did they feel ashamed."(**Al-Jahiz, 2001, p 18**).

The Arab *Al-Harithi* and *Ibn Ghazwan* come together with *Sahl ibn Harun* and *Al-Kindi* without the recipient feeling that he is biased towards his Arab identity by calling the Persian miserly. It seems that he presents here the methodology he will follow in tracing the images of miserliness in Arab society, allowing political tendencies to recede and lose their luster in his book "The Misers," which confirms that the man is observing a social phenomenon, nothing more and nothing less.

Sahl ibn Harun, who is of Persian origin, cites the opinion of the caliph *Omar ibn Al-Khattab* defending of his miserliness, saying: "*You reproach me for telling my servant: 'Knead it into dough as I have kneaded it into pastry to make it tastier and to increase its yield.'*" **Omar ibn Al-Khattab** told his family: "*Control the dough, for it is better than the two types of flour.*" (**Al-Jahiz, 2001, p41**) He defends his economic view in dealing with food, particularly dough. What is important for us is that he mentioned the opinion of *Omar ibn Al-Khattab* before any other opinion in his lengthy letter. I do not think he forgot the Persians' stance towards *Omar* and the Muslims' stance towards the Persians in the matter of his murder by "*Abu Loulouna*" the Persian. Thus, "*Omar ibn Al-Khattab*" comes in the context of the ideal example and good role model for *Sahl ibn Harun*, far from the political influences that could increase hatred in the relationship between Persians and Arabs.

The presentation of the letter from *Sahl ibn Harun* by *Al-Jahiz* -beginning with the opinion of *Omar ibn al-Khattab*- over other stories may be the greatest evidence of his objective approach, so that no one thinks he is attributing blame to the Persians or imposing a negative image upon them, and to demonstrate his commitment to peaceful coexistence with others.

In the story of "*Al-Mawrazi*," *Al-Jahiz* renews his rejection of comparing the stingy Persian with the generous Arab, as he states: "*Among the wonders of the people of Merv is what we heard from our elders. There was a man from Merv who would always go on pilgrimage and trade, and he would stay with a man from Iraq who would honor him and provide for him. He often said to that Iraqi: 'I wish I could see you in Merv so that I could repay you for your generosity and what you do for me every time you host me.'*" So, after a long time, that Iraqi went to that area. What made the journey and the estrangement easier for him was the presence of his Mervi friend there. When he arrived, he approached him in his travel clothes, wearing his turban, cap, and cloak to stay with him. When he found him sitting with his companions, he greeted him and embraced him. The man did not recognize him and asked him a question as someone who had never seen him before. The Iraqi thought to himself: '*Perhaps his not recognizing me is due to the veil.*' So, he removed his veil and began his inquiry. The man denied him once again. He said: '*Perhaps it is because of the hood,*' so he took it off. Then he introduced himself and renewed his inquiry, but the man still denied him even more. He thought: '*Perhaps he does not recognize me because of the cap.*' The Mervi realized that there was nothing left for the oblivious and the ignorant to relate to. He said: '*If you came out of your skin, I would not recognize you.*" (**Al-Jahiz, 2001, p53-54**)

In the story, *Al-Jahiz* introduced the stingy Persian (the *Marwazi*) and ignored or concealed the character of the generous man, as he did not specify his identity, nor did he say

he was an Arab from the land of Iraq, but rather made him Iraqi, while Iraq at that time was teeming with other ethnicities besides Arabs.

The reader doesn't feel that they are facing a comparison; the other party is ambiguous, their identity unknown, and all that is certain is that they are a noble Iraqi.

There is also the story of (*Al-Thaqafi*) with Abu Said Al-Farsi, who is from the mawali; the story tells that a Thaqafi borrowed a sum of money from Abu Said, and a year passed without the Thaqafi repaying his debt. *"He would perhaps prolong his stay with him, attending lunch and eating with him, all the while wanting his loan. When the matter dragged on, he said to him one day while at his table: 'This money has Zakat, and you know that when I lent this money, it was at risk of being lost and subject to long disputes, and that the stingy could inherit it. We accepted a small profit from you because we thought well of your judgment. Otherwise, we would not have accepted this money.*

And if the condition was that it should be returned after a year, I have given you an extension of a month or two... My request has been long, and your disregard has been prolonged." He said this while not stopping his eating" (*Al-Jahiz, 2001, p71-72*). Then, when he pressed his companion further, another *Thaqafi* informed him that repayment should be done in the mosque, not in his house, which embarrassed Al-Farsi, so he said: *"You mean that I desire his lunch. By God, I have only eaten with him to make him shy from the sanctity of sharing a meal and to make his generosity a reason for hastening the need."* Then he stood up with the document, and he threw it against the wall until it broke. Then he spat on the document and rubbed some parts of it against each other. Then he tore it and threw it away. Then he said to all who witnessed the gathering: *"This is one thousand dinars that I had from this man; bear witness all of you that I have received it from him and that he is free from everything I claim from him."* Then he stood up" (*Al-Jahiz, 2001, p72*). thought that the Thaqafi's companion had embarrassed him because he (was a Persian mawali), and after the Thaqafi begged him, he took his money out of shyness from what his companion had done. The Persian cleverly put a condition after saying: *"I believe that what prompted your companion to say what he said is that he is Arab and I am a mawali. If you make your intercessors from the mawali, I will take this."* (*Al-Jahiz, 2001, p73*).

The Thaqafi gathered all the factions in Basra until they requested from him until he took the money. This condition is considered a form of restoring the honor of the Persian self, which Al-Jahiz described in several instances as having pride and a dislike for humiliation. The Thaqafi's response is only a desire to erase what lingered in the heart of Abu Sa'id Al-Mawla, driven by a wish for coexistence and the stability of affection; there is no difference between the Arab and the Persian as long as they are united by a common bond of faith.

In *Al-Bukhala* (The Misers) by Al-Jahiz, it is evident that they are individuals of intelligence and awareness, as if they are advocates for their cause. We see them defending their miserliness in a manner that is not devoid of philosophy, persuasion, and references to religious texts. For instance, Ibn Harun in the previous example cites the Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the views of trustworthy scholars of knowledge and religion, leading the text to confirm his perspective, making the audience accept his opinion. An example of this is when Al-Mawrazi visited his companion and said: *"Abu Abdullah Al-Mawrazi entered upon a scholar from Khurasan, and he found him lighting a lamp made of green pottery. The scholar said to him: 'By God, you will never bring forth anything good. I reproached you for stone lamps, and you reproached me with pottery. Did you not know that*

pottery and stone absorb oil?' He replied: 'Excuse me, for I gave it to a friend of mine who sells oil, and he left it in the strainer for a month until it was saturated with oil, needing nothing else.' The scholar said: 'That is not what I mean; this remedy is simple. I have noticed it, but did you not know that the place of the fire in the lamp at the tip of the wick is constantly exposed to burning and drying out what is in it, and whenever it gets wet with oil, the fire returns to consume it? This is its nature.' He concludes with a logical analogy, persuading him by saying: 'If you were to compare how much oil that spot of the wick drinks with what it draws from the tip of the wick, you would know that it absorbs more. Moreover, that spot of the wick and the lamp remains a flowing liquid. It is said that if you place a lamp with a light in it and another without a light, it will not take long, just a night or two, until you find the misers' lamp filled with oil. Also, consider the salt placed under the lamp and the bran placed there to level and adjust it; you will find them both squeezing out oil. All of this is a loss and a deception that only the corrupt would disregard.' The scholar said: 'What should I do, may I be sacrificed for you?' He replied: 'Make a lamp, for glass is more secure and does not know moisture and does not accept dirt that can only be removed with great difficulty or by burning fire...' (*Al-Jahiz, 2001, p 50*). From this long dialogue, we deduce the intellectual nature of the Abbasid era, where reason prevailed and the style of argumentation emerged among the *Mu'tazila*, and *Al-Jahiz* is not far from this (*Walid Qassab, 1976*).

The character of the Persian miser is distinguished by a high degree of intelligence and the ability to persuade, shaped by the philosophical elements available in the scientific environment of that time.

The miser in *Al-Jahiz's* works did not embody the traits of an evil person, but rather often presented them as individuals with noble human qualities despite their stinginess. For instance, the chief accountant "from the people of Khorasan (an employee appointed by the governor) was a righteous and upright person, free from corruption and bribery, and from ruling based on emotions. He was also characterized by his restraint and stinginess..." *Thus, the governor's appointee was not prevented by his stinginess or political power from possessing good character, even though he was miserly with himself, as if he believed that his malice only affected himself and did not extend to others; "therefore, this character compels us to respect him despite his stinginess."*(*Magda Mahmoud, p 298*).

3. THE IMAGE OF THE MISER (THE JEWISH IMMIGRANT) IN SHAKESPEARE'S THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

3.1. The Pattern of Political and Religious Conflicts / The Pattern of Lack of Coexistence :

Searching for the image of the Jew in England leads us to examine the history of Jews there; to find that they are not an English element, but rather immigrants. "During the Norman conquest in 1066, England's economy was very simple, based solely on barter. William I, or the Conqueror, wanted to obtain his money from the lands he conquered in cash, so he decided to introduce a capitalistic financial element. He found his answer in members of the Jewish communities due to their usefulness, particularly in encouraging currency exchange.

Thus, Jews (as a functional, utilitarian settlement group) were encouraged to settle in order to act as commercial intermediaries in this new region and as collectors of the crown's revenues. Jews settled in England and established communities in London, Bristol, and Canterbury, and they were placed under the protection of the crown to engage in trade and usury, although they were excluded from the craft guilds, meaning they became a functional

intermediary group in the feudal society. It is noted that the Jews of England were not English; they were part of the neighbourhood German and French culture, speaking French among themselves and bearing French names. This ethnic isolation is a fundamental characteristic of the intermediary functional group (Abdul Wahab Al-Masiri, 463). The Jews were an economic pillar of the state at that time, which reflected on their status in the state, as they came under the king's guardianship, thereby receiving political support that allowed them to practice usury without fear. Their status reached a point where an "order was issued in 1217 for "the nobles and local officials to elect twenty-four individuals from the towns to protect the Jewish inhabitants there."

Jewish community members were asked to wear a special badge (consisting of two white ribbons) for their protection. This led to their prosperity; although they were a small minority with no more than four thousand members (according to one estimate), their wealth and possessions were significant (*Abdul Wahab Al-Masiri, 463*). This extravagant situation of the Jews, their protection from the higher authority, and their dealings in usury provoked the English nationalists who demanded the expulsion of the Jews from England, and this was realized. Eventually, the king was compelled to issue an order to expel the Jews from the province of Gascony, but the churchmen and barons knew that the secret to the king retaining the Jewish community members was that he employed them for his own benefit and made profits through them. They decided to offer him a tenth of their properties if he expelled them.

Indeed, the Jews were expelled permanently in 1290, "*(Abdul Wahab Al-Masiri, 465)* thus the Renaissance - the era of Shakespeare and other writers who revitalized literature during that time - was an era devoid of Jews. However, the English mentality during that period still retained the negative image of Jews known for their stinginess and love of money, and their dealings in usury at the expense of humanity. Shakespeare portrayed the miser (Shylock) in line with that image left by time, making his depiction a literal representation that the writer did not attempt to address according to the humanitarian principles and noble values that literature generally advocates. Thus, the image of the Jew appeared as the worst representation that could be presented of a human model. Interestingly, the setting of his story is not in England, but in Venice, making Italy the backdrop for the events, which indicates that the image of the Jew in Europe takes on a singular pattern. Even though he was not speaking about events in England, he was speaking with the voice of the Christian who shares a bond of faith with his Italian brother, thus uniting the English vision, which has a background of animosity towards the Jew, with that of the Italian Christian.

The image of the hated miser (Shylock) is highlighted in Shakespeare's attempt to draw the audience to accept the Christian's racism towards him, revealing the religious animosity that emerges from the breakdown of coexistence with the other. Shylock justifies his hatred for Antonio by saying:"

How like a fawning publican he looks!

I hate him for he is a Christian, But more for that in low simplicity

He lends out money gratis and brings down

The rate of usance here with us in Venice.

If I can catch him once upon the hip,

I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him. (W. Shakespeare, 2006, p 24-25)

The religious system presents what can be called an "integrative" system, which allows Jews to give themselves the superiority of being God's chosen people who are not held accountable and cannot be compared to others, as they are the best in everything. Thus, the inflated ego with a deep religious dimension clashes with another ego that carries a different religious dimension.

SHYLOCK

When Jacob grazed his Uncle Laban's sheep—

This Jacob from our holy Abram was,

As his wise mother wrought in his behalf

The third possessor; ay, he was the third—

ANTONIO

And what of him? Did he take interest?

SHYLOCK

No, not take interest, not, as you would say,

Directly "interest." Mark what Jacob did.

When Laban and himself were compromised

That all the eanlings which were streaked and pied

Should fall as Jacob's hire, the ewes being rank

In end of autumn turned to the rams, (W. Shakespeare, 2006, p 26-27)

The text refers to Shylock's attempt to distort the religious text, exonerating himself from the issue of usury while trying to convince Antonio that the religious text is interpreted as interest that does not result from theft. He overlooks the harm inflicted on the debtor who pays him double, making usury and theft two sides of the same coin. The text does not stop there; it takes on other dimensions, as we are faced with a comparison between two images: the first is unethical, represented by the usurious Jew, and the second is moral and religious, embodied in Antonio's condemnation of what the Jew said, presenting the Christian as a religious man and the model representing Christians. The truth is that the "pride pattern" of racism in the play represents a racism shared by both the Jew and the Christian; Shakespeare praises the Christian to the point of reaching the highest model, while he despises the Jew. Similarly, the same happens with the Jew who looks down on the Christian, thus dividing the theatrical text between two forms of racism that are equally significant. The racial discrimination is evident; even in the attire worn by the Jew, which proudly indicates his Jewishness in his statement: "And I spat on my cloak, which people recognize as my Judaism." It is, therefore, a source of pride that the (Christian) would insult by spitting on it, as mentioned in the text.

But Shakespeare seems objective in part of his play when he makes "Shylock" justify his hatred for Christians by saying:

*He hath disgraced me and hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses,
mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends,
heated mine enemies— and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes?
Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?*

(W.Shakespeare, 2006, p 77-78)

Shakespeare tried in his dialogue to justify this enmity by being somewhat objective, but he soon retreats from his objectivity, and racism appears in another text where he sought to portray the Jew -who had been cunning throughout the events of the play—as less intelligent than the Christian, particularly when he made the bond that stipulated the extraction of a pound of flesh from the Christian in the place chosen by Shylock. This condition was to take effect if Antonio did not repay on time.

On the day of execution, the foolishness of the Jew becomes clear when he is defeated by Portia, who disguised herself as a lawyer; she was able, with one word in the contract, to end the case in favour of Antonio.

Shakespeare does not stop there; we see him exaggerate in describing the Christian with many noble human qualities, portraying him as the model of a selfless human being dedicated to the happiness of others when he willingly borrowed under (Shylock)'s condition for the sake of his friend's happiness. Then he appears as the good man who does not accept the (Duke) to be lenient in applying the law against him when he says:

*I never heard a passion so confused,
So strange, outrageous, and so variable
As the dog Jew did utter in the streets.
“My daughter, O my ducats, O my daughter!
Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!
Justice – the law – my ducats – and my daughter!
A sealèd bag, two sealèd bags of ducats,
Of double ducats, stol’n from me by my daughter,
And jewels, two stones, two rich and precious stones,
Stol’n by my daughter. Justice, find the girl, (W.Shakespeare, 2006, p 66)*

The situation worsens in describing the Jew to the point of an exaggerated lack of humanity when his son escapes with his Christian lover:

*Why, there, there, there, there A diamond gone cost me two thousand ducats in Frankfurt The curse never fell upon our nation till now, I never felt it till now.
Two thousand ducats in that, and other precious, precious jewels! I would my daughter were dead at my foot and the jewels in her ear;*

(W. Shakespeare, 2006, p 79)

The irony in this text becomes apparent when we compare it to the previous one; the Christian appears willing to enforce the judgment against himself for the sake of the survival of Venice and its trade, while (Shylock) wishes for the annihilation of his entire nation for the loss of his money, in addition to his desire for his daughter's death and the survival of the diamonds.

4. CONCLUSION

From the above, we conclude that the image of the other was not positive in English literature, as the Jew did not enjoy as much coexistence as the Persian did. One might say that the unity of religion was a reason for their coexistence, and on the surface, this statement seems undoubtedly true. However, we also add that Arabs have coexisted with others who differ from them in belief; Arabs lived throughout their rule in previous eras with non-Arab peoples or minorities in a co-existential manner. Mark Cohen traces this in his book "Arab Relations with Jews" and presents it by comparing it with their relations with other nations. He states: "When I began studying the history of Jews in the Middle Ages about thirty years ago, the prevailing opinion at that time was that the Jews under the influence of the 'crescent' enjoyed stability, great protection, and a degree of political and cultural integration more than the Jews who were under the influence of the cross," and that is a true testimony.

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