

Arabic *Maqāmāt* and Spanish Picaresque Novel

(Comparative analysis of al-Hamadānī's *Maqāmāt* and *The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes and His Fortunes and Adversities* by anonymous author)

Classical Arabic *Maqāmā* is a phenomenon in the oriental literary works and is of particular interest for the comparative research studies. It has a certain likeness to the antique literature¹, on the one part, and to the European picaresque novel², on the other one. The present article deals with the issue of relations existing between the Arabic *Maqāmāt* and the Spanish picaresque novel. Comparing Al-Hamadānī's *Maqāmāt*, which are considered to be the first cycle of a *Maqāma* and *The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes* (16th century), which was published by an anonymous author and is considered to be the first Spanish picaresque novel, as well as revealing their concrete likeness or differences will assist us to discuss the issue concerning the existing possible genetic ties between these two literary genres. First, we will generally review each of them.

The *Maqāma*, a classical Arabic literary prosaic genre, developed in the 10th century; its area of application covered the territory beginning with India and ending with Spain. *Maqāma* is a short story about a fictional hero recounted by a narrator. Usually, the author creates a cycle consisting of a dozen of *Maqāmāt*. In each of them the narrator meets the main hero, who is traveling from town to town and tells us either about his propagation or his confidence tricks. Protagonist of the classical *Maqāmāt* is a competent, cognizant, educated man, but at the same time he is a liar and is a villain. He is a vagrant poet and an adventurer, whose eloquence makes his life; he often tells lies. Sometimes, the narrator himself becomes the victim of his outrageous lies, who every time reproaches the main hero for his false pretences. From the view of content, exactly these two main heroes unite the separate *Maqāmāt*. The Arabic *Maqāmāt* are characterized by almost persistent *Saj'* (a form of rhymed prose), which includes verses. Two, most eminent authors of the classical Arabic *Maqāmāt* are Badī' al-Zamān al-Hamadānī (969-1007), whose name is closely connected with the development of the *Maqāma* literary genre,

¹ G. E von Grunebaum, Avicena's *Risāla fi-l-išq* and courtly love. - *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. XI, 4 (1952), 237.

² J.T. Monroe, (translator and author of the Introduction), *al-Maqāmāt al-luzumīyyah* by Abu al-Tahir Muhammad ibn Yusuf al-Tamīmī al-Saraqustī ibn al-Ashtarkuwī (d.538/1143) (Leiden-Boston- Köln: E.J. Brill, 2002), 11.

and al-Harīrī of Basra (1054-1122), in creative works of whose *Maqāmāt* reached an all-time high.³

The Spanish picaresque literature originated in the middle of 16th century. The word *picaresque* comes from *pícaro* that in Spanish means “rogue”, “rascal” and “villain”. Picaresque novels are usually realistic, satirical and often depict the adventures of a roguish hero of low social class, who lives by his wits in a corrupt and immoral society. Picaro’s adventures are funny, aimed at entertaining a reader, and at the same time, it reveals unfairness, which predominates in this society. This style of novel originated in sixteenth century Spain and flourished throughout Europe in the 17th-18th centuries. *The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes* by an anonymous author is the first picaresque novella published in 1552. The picaresque novels also include the autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini (1558), Mateo Alemán y de Enero’s *The Life of Picaro Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599) and others.⁴

Obvious is that a rogue and a vagrant person unites these two literary works, originated in different epochs and cultural spaces. In order to show concrete resemblance or difference between them from the view of the form and content, we have analyzed each character.

There are two main similarities between *Maqāmāt* and a picaresque novel with regard to outward, formal signs:

1. Episodic structure;
2. Narration in the first person.

There are also two differences:

1. *Maqāmāt* use verses, rhymed prose and a picaresque novel is characterized by the common prose;
2. *Maqāmāt* include the so-called *pseudo isnād*⁵, while it is absent in *The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes*. Relevantly, a *Maqāma* cycle envisages two permanent heroes (one of them is a narrator) and only one hero is in a picaresque novel.

³ Brockelmann C. *Makāma*. First Encyclopaedia of Islam, Vol. V (1913-1936), Leiden-New York-Köln: E.J.Brill, 1993, 116.

⁴ http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Picaresque_novel

⁵ *Isnād* – the chain of witnesses which proves the historicity of the story.

It is difficult to affirm that a picaresque genre has taken its structural form from the Arabic *Maqāmāt*, since this system was spread throughout the Eastern World. Narration in the first person (presence of a narrator-eyewitness) in the East has its concrete motivation.⁶ Presumably, from this point of view, a picaresque novel fell under the influence of the oriental literature. In a picaresque novel there are no formal signs of *Maqāmāt*, namely, rhymes prose and *isnād*, which in *Maqāmāt* originated from the tradition existing in the Arabic culture and which are not observed in the Spanish literature.

The analysis of the plot of these literary works revealed the following similarities:

1. Both works are literary, and demonstrate grotesque reality;
2. Both works have ironic attitude towards the inherited wealth;
3. Both works present different social strata of the society;
4. Both works deals with an anti-hero, who is subject to criticism from social environment.

The analysis also revealed differences:

1. Time and space in *Maqāmāt* are interrupted, while in a picaresque novel the narration is based upon chronological principle;
2. *Maqāmāt* are characterized by the development of the plot, stereotyped nature of situations, mannerism, conditionality of activities, while a picaresque novel lacks all these aspects.

Both differences therein are natural and are conditioned by the fact that *Maqāmāt*, as opposed to a picaresque novel, represent the literary forms typical of the Middle Ages, while time and space in the mediaeval literary monuments are not apprehended adequately. As for the similarities, it is obvious, that both of them are distinguished for artistic unique identity and ironic attitude towards the inherited wealth. At the moment of origin of these genres, against a background of certain social and political changes, the literary works acquired the ironic implication. Both in the Arabic and Spanish literary works, this process was considered to be the phase of converting the heroic age into the farce. The picaresque novel's anonymous author laughs at an ideal knight, the main hero of a tale of chivalry, and chivalrous romanticism. Of particular interest is the fact that *Maqāmāt*, created through the identity aesthetics, include such ironic attitude - the author, on the one hand, keeps to the literary etiquette and completely observes it from the view

⁶ See: R. Drory, *Models and Contacts: Arabic Literature and its Impact on Medieval Jewish Culture*. (Leiden-Boston- Köln: E.J.Brill, 2000),12.

of the form and on the other one, he manages to be witty at the canonic literature and *adab*⁷ genres. *Isnād*, used in the works, represents a parody of succession of episodes showing Muhammad's life, which is used to convince the audience of the credibility of the occurrence that took place in the Islamic world.

Often, the main subject of discussions in respect of the works of these two genres is the antihero, who criticizes the social environment, since the so-called, vagrant and idler "honest swindler" is exactly that character, who is borrowed by the anonymous author of the first picaresque novel from *Maqāmāt*. Despite the lies of this "hero" and his behavior, which is intolerable from the moral point of view, he deserves sympathy of a reader and is not considered as a negative character, as though not he, but environmental conditions are to be blamed and as if the reality forces him to misbehave. The author, through this method, criticizes the social unfairness ruling in the society.

Classical Arabic *Maqāmāt* applies to the roguish antihero and thereby, they have a lot in common with *Satyricon* by Gaius Petronius and *The Golden Ass (Asinus Aureus)* or *Metamorphoses* by Apuleius, as well as with *The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes* and other picaresque works... We shall never find out, whether al-Hamadānī knew the antique literature or not or whether the anonymous author of *The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes* ever read Arabic *Maqāmāt* or not. We think that in case of *Maqāmāt*, the influence of the antique literature upon them is more arguable. If we take into consideration that the social and economic situation of the 10th century Arabic world, which, under the conditions of destruction of the Empire, directly promoted the origin of a stratum of impoverished vagrant bibliophiles and that al-Hamadānī, who is considered to be the author of this genre, belongs to this stratum, it is less likely that he read *Satyricon* and borrowed a personage of a deceiver antihero. The then Arabic world was full of vagrant swindlers. But in case of a picaresque novel, it is not ruled out that the Renaissance epoch was marked out by the revival of the Greco-Roman literature and it should be also taken into consideration that likely it was influenced by the Arabic *Maqāmāt*, the more so because of the fact that the classic Arabic *Maqāmāt* were very popular in Spanish Arabia.

And finally, we conclude that:

1. The fact of exerting influence upon the first picaresque novel by *Maqāmāt* is not confirmed, though *The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes* obviously includes a common oriental plot;
2. The reason of using irony in the works shall be sought in the social and political changes; in this case, resemblance is more casual;

⁷ *Adab* – Canonical Arabic Literature

3. 3. The author of a picaresque novel might borrow the character of a deceiver antihero from *Maqāmāt* that is more likely, though it is difficult to affirm this.

The fact is that the Arabic *Maqāmāt*, several centuries earlier than the Renaissance Spanish picaresque novel, presented second-rate personages, who represented different social strata, as well as definitely bad or good generalized characters, created artistic reality and developed primitive social criticism, and all this was really significant in the X-XII century Arabic literature under the conditions of supremacy of literary law.