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Dissimilarity and Horizon of Expectation: A Reading in a Pre-Islamic Text

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This paper aims to develop and illustrate a model of ancient Arab literary criticism by employing key concepts from German reception theory articulated by Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser. Specifically, the study highlights the creative dimensions manifested in Nabigha Al-Dhubyani's reception of Hassan ibn Thabit's poetry, focusing explicitly on their differing perspectives during the renowned recitation incident. In doing so, the paper explores particular mechanisms of literary reception, notably 'conjoint reading,' which Iser encourages through the concepts of 'indeterminacy' and the 'horizon of expectation,' establishing a dynamic relationship between the text and its contemporary audience. Moreover, the analysis considers the profound influence of initial receptions on subsequent interpretive processes, a phenomenon described by Jauss as 'the merging of horizons'.

Keywords: Reception, Horizon of Expectation, Asymmetry, Indeterminacy.

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Introduction

The reader has become a focal point of literary criticism in recent years. After delving into the author and the text, critical methodologies realized that a comprehensive understanding of the creative phenomenon could only be achieved by focusing on the reader. Literary works are composed with an intended audience in mind, whether in recitation or writing. Moreover, focusing solely on the author is insufficient to grasp the essence of art, as art is neither a psychological document of its creator nor merely a historical artefact, nor is it entirely an independent, self-contained structure. Instead, the literary work functions as an intermediary sign between the artist and the audience, conveying psychological content that transcends the limits of individual consciousness and may not refer to something precisely defined yet necessarily evoke meaning.

Consequently, the role of the receivers is not secondary, and reception must be dynamic and interpretative rather than static or passive. Although recognizing the reader's importance is widely accepted among contemporary critics and creators, interpretations of their role in the creative process vary significantly, influenced by distinct critical or philosophical perspectives and methodologies. The 'Aesthetics of Reception' school of German criticism significantly transformed contemporary literary criticism. Jauss notably emphasized the interactive role of the audience in shaping textual meaning, positing that readers bring their own experiences to the text, and these experiences shape how the text is understood, thus broadening the horizon of expectation (Jambak et al., 2022). Similarly, Jauss asserts that the horizon of expectation evolves as new readers introduce different cultural and historical perspectives, leading to shifts in textual interpretation (Thiselton, 2012). Wolfgang Iser further complements this perspective by highlighting how indeterminacies in a text leave spaces for readers to fill with their interpretations, making literary reception an active, creative process (Zhou, 2013). Similarly, the translation and reproduction of cultural images and textual gaps heavily depend on the horizon of expectation of translators and target audiences (Yang, 2019).

Nonetheless, this research presumes that attention to the reader has existed implicitly throughout the history of literary criticism, even without formal theoretical articulation. The evidence explored through German reception aesthetics reflects longstanding practices evident in pre-Islamic criticism, extensively documented across literary and critical histories. Given that the receiver's implicit presence during creation is typically presumed, this study explicitly investigates their actual, historical engagement. Hence, the research addresses three central questions: Was ancient Arab literary reception predominantly static, characterized merely by passive enjoyment or disengagement? Were the horizons of the text and the receiver always congruent? Furthermore, what impact did the initial reception have on subsequent interpretations by later audiences?

Reception between Jauss and Iser

Reception, according to Jauss

Jauss was particularly interested in reconnecting literature with its historical context. Observing an increasing neglect of literature's historical dimension, he aimed explicitly to "bring history back to the centre of literary studies" (Holub 2000,

97). In his seminal lecture, *Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory*, presented at the University of Constance in 1967, Jauss proposed a revised model as an alternative to traditional literary histories, which he perceived as inadequate. According to Jauss, literary history is "a process of aesthetic reception and production activated by readers engaging with literary texts, dynamically involving both the critic's reflection and the writer's responsive creativity" (Jauss 2016, 53). Jauss critically addressed Marxist and formalist literary theories for their monolithic interpretations. While Marxist criticism emphasized production conditions, viewing literary works merely as reflections of societal infrastructures, it neglected literature's historical evolution. Consequently, it reduced the social dimension of reception to recognizing a predetermined reality (Jauss 2016, 41). Conversely, formalism commendably approached literature scientifically and eventually reconsidered historical aspects initially overlooked. Nevertheless, formalism still fails to address literature's essential relationship with society adequately.

Therefore, in his attempt to overcome the pitfalls of Marxism and Formalism, Jauss aimed to reconcile the social function of literature with its aesthetic function. Jauss posits that the audience is "not merely a passive element whose role is limited to being moved by literature, but rather it develops into a force that contributes to making history" (Jauss 2016, 49). The receptive audience, aware of its role, cannot stand before literary works merely at the level of passive or unreflective reading. The role of the receiver is to contribute to literary development, and the relationship between literature and the receiver reveals two aspects: aesthetic and historical. The reception that the work enjoys among its first readers presupposes an aesthetic value judgement made concerning other works read before. This initial recognition can evolve and enrich, forming a series of subsequent receptions that determine the work's historical importance (Jauss, 2016). Jauss noted that literature undertakes an ethical mission; it actively shapes the society that produced it. It is incorrect to consider literature merely as depicting, imitating, or reflecting a reality experienced by the creator and the reader. The function of literature is to create, and reading can liberate the reader "from social conformity, from the constraints of actual life and its preconceptions" (Jauss 2016, 86). The new literary form, which Formalism valued in terms of evolution, does not limit its function to estranging literature by placing 'the new' in opposition to the old. Nevertheless, it can also enable a different perception of things through its prior representation of experience content, declaring itself through literature before engaging in the reality of life (Jauss, 2016). Some literary works were able to question the norms and morals that society seemed to have ready-made solutions for. To affirm the inseparability of literature's aesthetic and social functions, Jauss exemplifies Gustave Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary*. The novel's new narrative technique violated one of the rules of the traditional novelistic genre, so Flaubert's novel could radically raise issues related to life practice (Jauss, 2016). The charges faced by the author, who claimed the novel promoted immorality, could not be proven; the book does not explicitly contain any character that condemns the protagonist's actions (Jauss, 2016). Therefore, if no one within the narrative explicitly condemns 'marital infidelity' in a realistic novel, then public opinion and prevailing social norms are what should be questioned. Jauss believes

that when a literary work appears, it is not novel merely because of a set of clues and signals, explicit or implicit. Rather, from implicit references and familiar properties, its audience is already prepared to receive it in a certain way (Jauss, 2016). Thus, the receiver confronts the new work with what Jauss calls 'the horizon of expectation,' a term that originated with Husserl and Gadamer. As the reading progresses, the horizon can be extended, modified, or redirected (Jauss, 2016). The horizon of expectation is not just an individual reader's subjective impressions but a system of references that can be objectively defined, shaped by three historical factors at the moment of a literary work's appearance: the audience's previous experience with the literary genre to which the work belongs, the established forms and themes of past works known to the audience, and the opposition between poetic language and practical language, between the fictional world and the world of daily life (Jauss, 2016). The horizon of expectation, according to Jauss, is what allows for the evaluation of new works through the reactions of the receiving audience. New works that invoke the horizon of expectation without redirection are classified as what Jauss terms entertainment literature, which satisfies the desire to see beauty replicated in familiar forms (Jauss, 2016). These works hold no artistic value, unlike those that compel the receiver to redirect their horizon, creating a distance between the receiver's expectation and 'the horizon of expectation,' a distance Jauss calls the 'aesthetic distance' because it allows for measuring the pure artistic property of the work, felt by the contemporary audience as a source of pleasure, astonishment, or perplexity (Jauss, 2016). Consequently, the disparity between the work's expectation horizon is now familiar, and the audience's expectation horizon is resolved within the realm of future aesthetic experience. Jauss argues that the succession of readings for a literary work enriches and acts as an intermediary between it and contemporary reading. The relationship between the text and the recipient is one of questions and answers. To evaluate literary works from the perspective of the present horizon, one must consider the series of past receptions to articulate the work's significance. The present horizon cannot exist in isolation from the past, nor can historical horizons be reached independently. Understanding lies in the process of merging these horizons. Jauss, influenced by Gadamer in this respect, suggested that understanding past works correctly is impossible without prejudice or 'prejudgments,' as these are inherently linked to historical contexts themselves and are not obstacles to understanding but rather prerequisites for the possibility of understanding (Selden, 2006). Therefore, the contemporary interpreter's horizon is the product of past horizons, or as Gadamer terms it, 'the fusion of horizons.' Moreover, there is no clear demarcation between the past and present horizons because the world of the text is not foreign to us insofar as it has contributed to shaping our horizons (Selden, 2006).

Reception, according to Iser

Iser focused on reconstructing literary theory by concentrating on the process of reading. While Jauss began with the history of literature and relied on hermeneutics, Iser was significantly influenced by Roman Ingarden's phenomenology, adopting his model and some of his concepts, yet striving to overcome the perceived limitations in Ingarden's analysis of the relationship between the text and the reader. Iser noted

that literary theory had increasingly shifted attention toward the response to literary works from readers. While Jauss's treatments address reception as a vast universe, Iser concerns himself with the microscopic entities related to the reader's response (Selden, 2006). As the element interacting with the text, Iser's reliance on the reader is rooted in a phenomenological foundation. From a phenomenological perspective, literary works are not complete, real objects that exist independently of the perceiving subject, nor are they abstract ideal objects. They "always contain places... or spots characterized by indeterminacy" (Selden 2006, 490). While things in reality are defined, the objects or subjects included in literary works are not precisely defined; hence, "it is possible... for a context or a specific reference to limit indeterminacy" (Selden 2006, 490).

Iser states that a text can only possess meaning when read, and merely 'graphemic manifestations' require a reader's intervention to produce the aesthetic object. The relationship between 'the artistic pole' and 'the aesthetic pole,' that is, the text and the reader, is bidirectional: 'from the text to the reader' and 'from the reader to the text.' The interaction between these poles arises from 'places of indeterminacy' that afford the reader a degree of freedom and diversity in perception, creating 'the aesthetic object' during the reader's attempt to resolve areas of indeterminacy. However, this freedom is not unlimited. Naturally, the text's design limits the infinite possibilities of the object and guides the reader toward a specific path, termed by Iser as 'reader's guidance' (*Leserlenkung*). However, the text leaves gaps for the reader to fill or eliminate (Selden, 2006). To further describe the interaction between the reader and the text, Iser developed the concept of a 'wandering viewpoint.'

The text cannot be apprehended immediately, and the reader can perceive no more than successive sentences during reading. Sentences, in turn, can designate only the work's total subject through their interconnections. Thus, the semantic realization does not occur in the text but rather in the reader, who must activate the interconnections preconstructed by the sequence of sentences (Iser, 1998) through the processes of "recollection" and "anticipation." By its structure, each sentence will arouse a confident expectation in the reader, which may be confirmed upon reading a subsequent sentence or denied. One of the literary work's properties is "that the sequences of sentences are constructed in such a way that the interconnections adjust, and even frustrate, the expectations they had previously aroused" (Iser 1998, 60), affecting what has been read before. This dynamic, governed by the interplay of anticipation and retrospection, makes the act of reading feel like an experience in itself: "Because this dialectic governs our reading, it acquires the status of an event and gives us the feeling that something real is happening" (Selden 2006, 495).

The interaction between the reader and the text arises from the 'blank' structure, as the two cannot match perfectly. The possibility accompanying the reader in confronting the text results from the inherent 'dissimilarity' of both sides. Iser benefits from psychology research in this respect. As long as the text does not define subjects precisely, the perspectives it raises remain in motion. Through them, dissimilarity begins to pave the way to reach a common ground for a situation.

However, owing to the complexity of the textual structure, it is difficult for this situation to be final. Instead, it is constantly reshaped just as the projections are subsequently adjusted (Iser, 1998). By the same token, Iser (1998) posits that if a literary work is intentionally created, it does not precisely mirror the real world, nor should the real elements within the text be seen as representations of reality. Once incorporated into the text, these elements are transformed into indicators of alternative meanings and are thus prompted to detach from their original definition. These elements represent a 'reproduced reality', an imaginatively constructed version of the world created by the author to express a stance. Since this stance does not exist in the given world referred to by the author, it can only take the form "if it is integrated into the real world" (Iser 1998, 11).

Iser labels the relationship between the text and the external context as 'the register,' which is organized by what he calls 'text strategies', i.e., its structure that arranges the register's material and provides the conditions for conveyance (Selden 2006). Iser also developed the concept of the 'implied reader' to describe the effects of literary work and readers' responses to it. The implied reader is not an actual, real-life, or historically defined reader but a textually embedded construct anticipating the presence of a recipient without necessarily defining them (Iser, 1998). This conceptual figure represents the role every actual reader is supposed to play.

In Iser's narrative text, multiple perspectives intertwine (narrator, characters, plot, etc.), and no single perspective can constitute the text's meaning. Thus, the reader moves among these perspectives to find a meeting point, which is the meaning of the text implicitly drawn by the author. However, the text does not linguistically formulate this meeting point but prompts the reading process to form mental images and alter viewpoints. Since the reader (any real reader) has references and beliefs which do not match those of the author, they experience reading with a second self, a projected consciousness assumed to match the author's second self (the implied author, as per Wayne Booth). However, they do not completely sacrifice their references and beliefs; instead, these recede into the background as they engage with the text experience, exerting their influence subconsciously. Tension arises during this interplay between the reader's second self and the creator's second self, a prerequisite for processing and understanding (Iser, 1998).

Through the 'implied reader' concept, Iser aims to demonstrate how the text's structures can enrich the reader's experiences by 'creating a reality' that neither matches the external world nor the reader's psyche. This reality takes the form of mental conceptions that lead to the text as it translates itself within the reader's consciousness (Iser, 1998). As real readers' references vary, each realization of the implied reader's role will be partial, context-dependent, and describable by readers, aiding in evaluating and analyzing individual realizations of the text over time. This proves that the text's structure allows for multiple modes of realization (Iser, 1998). As Iser states, the implied reader is "a transcendent model that makes it possible to describe the constructed effects of literary texts and determines the reader's role that can be defined through the textual structure and the constructed acts" (Iser 1998, 34).

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative literary analysis methodology and employs the German reception theory theoretical lens developed by Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser. It specifically explores the critical reception of Hassan ibn Thabit's poetry in pre-Islamic Arab literary criticism, focusing on how Nabigha Al-Dhubyani's critique aligns with the concepts of the 'horizon of expectation' and 'indeterminacy' as formulated in reception aesthetics.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Jauss's concept of the 'horizon of expectation' and Iser's theory of 'indeterminacy.' Jauss's theory emphasizes the role of the reader's historical and cultural background in shaping their interpretation of a text. According to Jauss, the audience's pre-existing knowledge influences how they receive a work and creates an evolving set of expectations over time (Jauss, 2016). This evolving horizon forms a dynamic interpretive framework reflecting continuity and change in literary understanding. Iser's notion of indeterminacy highlights the interpretive freedom afforded to readers by the gaps left in a text, which they must actively fill through their own subjective experiences (Iser, 1998). Together, these frameworks underscore the interactive nature of literary meaning, rooted in the dialogue between text and reader. These perspectives examine how Nabigha reinterpreted Hassan ibn Thabit's poetry and how subsequent readers continued to reshape its meaning across different historical contexts.

Data collection

Primary data were drawn from key pre-Islamic Arabic poetic works, focusing on Hassan ibn Thabit's verses and Nabigha Al-Dhubyani's critique during the famous Souk Okaz arbitration. Sources such as *Diwan Hassan Ibn Thabit* (1929) were examined alongside classical Arabic grammar and rhetorical texts by scholars such as Sibawayh, Al-Zajjaji, and Al-Anbari. These sources were selected for their linguistic and critical depth, offering insights into the evaluative criteria of early Arabic literary discourse. These primary sources provided the historical foundation necessary for understanding Hassan's poetry's critical reception and reinterpretation across different periods (Sibawayh, 1992).

Analytical approach

A close textual analysis was conducted on Hassan ibn Thabit's poetry, focusing on Nabigha's critical reception. The study employs Jauss's framework to explore how Nabigha's interpretation responds to the 'horizon of expectation' created by the text and aligns with or deviates from it based on cultural, linguistic, and aesthetic factors. Iser's concept of indeterminacy was used to examine how Nabigha sought to fill interpretative gaps in Hassan's use of specific words, such as "الجففات الغر" (gleaming bowls) and "بالضحى" (in the morning), which Nabigha critiqued and modified according to his interpretative strategies (Iser, 1998). This approach highlights the dynamic interaction between the reader and the text, showing how Nabigha's engagement functioned as a critical and creative reinterpretation within a shared cultural framework.

Comparative Methodology

This study also conducts a comparative analysis, examining how later grammarians and critics, such as Sibawayh and Al-Zajjaji, supported or refuted Nabigha's initial critique. By analyzing their positions, the research explores how the 'horizon of expectation' evolved as new generations of scholars reinterpreted Hassan's poetry in light of their historical and cultural contexts (Al-Zajjaji, 1979). This diachronic perspective reveals the shifting reception of the text and underscores the dynamic nature of literary interpretation across different intellectual traditions.

Reception history analysis

An essential component of the methodology involves tracing the reception history of Hassan ibn Thabit's poetry from Nabigha's critique through the readings of later scholars, such as Al-Anbari and Al-Marzubani. This study explores how the meaning of Hassan's verses evolved by examining how these scholars either affirmed or challenged Nabigha's reception. Such an approach situates literary interpretation within a historical continuum, highlighting the dynamic nature of literary reception and interpretation. This analysis shows that meaning is not fixed but somewhat fluid and dialogic, continuously reshaped by successive audiences and their contextual frameworks (Al-Marzubani, 1995).

Integration of Modern and Ancient Perspectives

This study bridges the gap between modern and ancient literary criticism by juxtaposing German reception theory with classical Arabic criticism. The methodological approach highlights the universality of specific critical processes, such as the audience's active role in shaping textual meaning, demonstrating that these principles operate across vastly different cultural and historical contexts. By drawing parallels between Nabigha's evaluative practices and the theoretical insights of Jauss and Iser, the study underscores a shared critical intuition regarding the reader's agency and the evolving nature of interpretation.

An example of an Ancient Reception

When a poet composes a work, their choice of words is not arbitrary because they understand that each word carries meaning and influences the idea intended to be conveyed to the receiver. The uniqueness of each poet is reflected in their style and word choices, as language forms a partnership among its speakers, offering them the freedom of selection. Thus, linguistic expression becomes both a personal and a communal act. Creative work expresses a personal vision transmitted from the creator to the receiver through linguistic means; hence, any work has objective and subjective aspects. The former ensures understanding between the creator and their audience, whereas the latter reveals the creator's thoughts and personal use of language.

The creator's use of language is an individual characteristic. Thus, Al-Jurjani considered the "composition" an integral part of the poet's craft. Suppose the material is the words of the language. In that case, the craft lies in the pursuit of grammatical meanings and rhetorical precision, which confer a distinctive style and justify attributing the speech to its creator. Any deviation in speech composed in a specific way toward another unintended direction spoils the meaning intended by the creator. Therefore, when we attribute poetry or any other form of verbal expression

to its author, our attribution is not due merely to the words and linguistic structures but to the deliberate intention embedded in the composition (Al-Jurjani, 2004).

In this sense, composition involves selecting words aligned with intended meanings formed in the mind and their expression within a structure oriented toward grammatical coherence. This is akin to what Al-Jurjani elaborates in his theory of i'jaz (inimitability), where composition is central to the poetic effect. 'Style' in contemporary studies, as Al-Jurjani suggested, is seen by modern linguists and stylistists as the projection of the 'substitution' axis onto the 'combination' axis. Language units are organized by substitutive relationships that allow certain elements to replace others in a specific context and by combinative relationships that structure the relationships of the selected linguistic elements (Baraka, 1993).

Through this projection process, the creator can influence the receiver, who, in turn, reacts when encountering the text. The text contains stimuli that evoke in the receiver judgments that are undoubtedly subjective, but when these judgments are grounded in textual cues, they take on an objective hue (Abdul-Mutallib, 1994). This reflects an early articulation of reader-response dynamics, in which the interaction between form, meaning, and perception is central to the reception process.

Indeterminacy and Participatory Reception

Al-Nabigha's critique of Hassan ibn Thabit's verses, in the context of the arbitration of poets at Souk Okaz, embodies the 'asymmetry' between the text and the receiver. This confirms that the ancient poetry receiver did not merely admire or disdain passively without intervention. Instead, the receiver was often a participant who interacted with the text based on intellectual, rhetorical, and cultural references.

A case in point is found in a poem by Hassan ibn Thabit may Allah be pleased with him consisting of thirty-five verses in praise of his people. However, two specific verses have been selected for critical analysis, as the critique directed by Al-Nabigha at Hassan was limited to these lines. Significantly, subsequent readings and interpretations by later scholars have also focused exclusively on these two verses, often without considering the rest of the poem. This selective reception illustrates how literary interpretation can be shaped by early authoritative critique, reinforcing the idea that reception is participatory and historically conditioned.

In Hassan ibn Thabit's verse:

"We were born, the sons of the Phoenix and the sons of Muhrq.

Therefore, we honour us as uncles and honour us as sons.

We have the gleaming bowls, bright, shining in the morning,

And our swords drip with the blood of valour." (Hassan, 1929)

ولذنا بني العنقاء وابني مُحَرَّق فأكرم بنا خالا وأكرم بنا ابنما
لنا الجففات الغرّ يلمعن بالضحي وأسيفنا يقطرن من نجدة دما

Interpreted Text (Received Text):

"...the white bowls... in the darkness,

And our swords flow... with blood."

In this translation:

- In the original, "الجففات الغرّ" is rendered as 'the gleaming bowls,' suggesting items of beauty or distinction that shine in the morning light. This imagery may symbolize purity, honour, or a proud display of generosity. The

interpreted version simplifies it to 'the white bowls,' omitting the dynamic aspect of gleaming, which flattens the original's poetic imagery and richness.

- The temporal setting also changes: "بالضحى" (in the morning) in the original becomes "بالدجى" (in the darkness) in the interpreted version. This change in temporal imagery significantly alters the tone, shifting from the optimism and clarity associated with morning to the ambiguity and solemnity of night.
- The line "أسيافا يقطرن من نجدة دما" is simplified in the interpreted text to 'our swords flow with blood,' removing the layered metaphor and the explicit link to "نجدة" (valour), which in the original emphasizes heroic action rather than mere violence.
- Al-Nabigha's critique of the use of specific words such as "الغُر", "الجففات", "الضحى", "الضحى", "أسياف" and "يقطرن" reflects a preference for more direct or perhaps more customary expressions in poetic diction. His feedback arguably prompted a reinterpretation that prioritized clarity and conventional aesthetics over metaphorical nuance, resulting in the adjustments observed in the received version of the text.

This case illustrates the active nature of early poetic reception, where interpretation was not passive reproduction but involved reconfiguring imagery, tone, and values based on prevailing poetic norms and the critic's horizon of expectation.

Moreover, in any case, it is impossible to attribute the modified version of the text with the final lexical choices to Hassan. Al-Nabigha maintained the aspect of 'composition' and preserved the intended purpose of Hassan ibn Thabit's verse. However, he sought to convey the same meaning in a manner that, while clearer or more conventional to him, deviated from the expressive richness of the original formulation. In doing so, the original ambiguity was not clarified. Instead, the interpretive tension was lost. As Al-Jurjani (2004) explains, what was understood was the utmost improbability: that words should have differing meanings when separated and agreed meanings when assembled and composed into speech.

It is evident that if there were no rhetorical differences between 'bowls and basins,' 'white and gleaming,' and 'swords and blades' in the composition of the verse, considering its poetic purpose, then there would have been no reason for Al-Nabigha to propose alternatives. This is especially significant given that Al-Nabigha's critique focused on rhetorical considerations rather than metrical flaws. His rewriting was motivated by the 'indeterminacies' in Hassan's verse words that prompted interpretive engagement from the receiver. In response, Al-Nabigha attempted to impart clarity by proposing specifications that would eliminate ambiguity.

Desiring to portray 'the bowls' as numerous and abundant, he proposed a plural form that explicitly indicates multiplicity in its original context. He substituted the word 'white' for 'gleaming' because he considered it more precise and more hyperbolic, arguing that 'gleaming' is merely a manifestation of whiteness, whereas 'white' is a fixed descriptive attribute. The choice of 'in the darkness' instead of 'in

the morning' was made for its rhetorical effectiveness. White objects appear more striking against a dark backdrop, whereas everything gleams in the morning. Finally, the term 'flow' was chosen over 'drip' because it was seen as more eloquent and more suitable for describing the abundance and intensity of valorous combat, thus enhancing the force of the poetic imagery.

However, the choices made by Al-Nabigha were tightly bound to the text and were not an autonomous dictate alien to its intended purpose. This is natural because the aesthetic subject realized through reception results from the interaction between the receiver's structure and the text's structure. According to Iser, this interaction has two aspects: lexical and affective. The lexical aspect guides the reader's response. It prevents it from becoming arbitrary, while the affective aspect represents the fulfilment of that potential, which is structured by the language of the text. As Iser explains, "the text remains the stronger party, and if the deficiency is in the capacity to be certain and in the defined intention... that is what causes the interaction between the text and the reader" (Iser, 1998).

From this perspective, the reception choices made by Al-Nabigha can be seen as an attempt to create "contact" between the two poles of the reception process: the text and the reader. These choices remain interpretative probabilities, reinforced by the receiver's literary and cultural repository, and accepted by the strategy of the text, as long as they represent a valid 'realization' selectively drawn from among the possible interpretations. As long as they fill 'the gap' between the poles of the process and allow both partners, author and receiver, to arrive at a shared understanding, the reinterpretations (e.g., the plurals 'basins' and 'blades') demonstrate the role of the reader as an active interpreter.

In this, Al-Nabigha embodies the model of the reader who does not fully surrender to immersion in the text at the expense of his critical faculties or subjectivity. Iser (1998) noted that the reader's pleasure begins when he becomes a producer, that is, when the text grants him the space to engage his faculties. Al-Nabigha refers to the text as a guide to what ought to be expressed in poems of pride. Perhaps his admiration for Al-Khansa's poetry in mourning Sakhr stems from the exaggeration and intensity in her description, which is so much so that she was regarded as the most eloquent of both humans and jinn.

Thus, Al-Nabigha's choices could be understood as a background for Hassan's text, functioning as a 'modification' prompted by anticipations evoked in earlier poem verses. Al-Nabigha's nuanced stance supports this. He acknowledged Hassan's poetic talent but issued a reservation: "You are a poet... but you have lessened." For Al-Nabigha, when Hassan recited the poem, he constructed the general subject of the text. No moment of recitation could stand apart from the expectations. It provoked expectations that were either confirmed or cancelled as the verses progressed. It is inconceivable that Al-Nabigha would have issued such a judgment on the part of the poem unless he had been fully engaged in the act of reception, attentive during the performance, and imaginatively immersed in the world of the text. Unlike a given subject, the subject of a literary text can only be imagined through the different and successive stages of the reading process (Iser, 1998).

Finally, Hassan ibn Thabit's text retained its original structure and significance, allowing subsequent receivers after Al-Nabigha to engage with and reinterpret its meanings across generations. It can be said that "the openness of meaning," "asymmetry," and "indeterminate places" within the text served as stimuli that motivated Al-Nabigha to participate in the process of meaning-making, drawing from the layers of significance embedded in the composition.

Conversely, through his critique, Al-Nabigha performed one of the roles of the 'implied reader,' engaging with the text not as a passive consumer but as an interpreter who relied on his cultural framework and rhetorical sensibilities. His reading of Hassan's poem shaped one trajectory of reception and opened the door to subsequent readings that built upon or responded to his interpretation. He contributed to the dynamic evolution of the poem's meaning over time, enriching the text with multiple interpretive possibilities that continue to resonate in the broader tradition of Arabic literary criticism.

The Horizon of Expectation between the Poet and the Receiver

The poetic doctrine in the pre-Islamic era was not uniform, which is natural since poets differed in their personalities, abilities, and beliefs. We can observe clear divergences in poetic issues and critical disputes, such as the enduring debate over nature versus craft and word versus meaning. What concerns us in this study is a specific facet of this discourse, namely, how these debates relate to reader reception and poetic evaluation.

Since the essence of poetry lies in imaginative construction, it was only natural that the issue of "truth and falsehood" in poetry should arise, particularly about genres such as praise, boasting, and satire. Opinions among critics and poets varied: one group asserted that "the best poetry is the most deceitful," while another argued that "the best poetry is the most truthful." From the standpoint of the aesthetics of reception, we can consider both directions as forming distinct horizon of expectation frameworks that both the poet and the audience are keenly aware of and work within.

To illustrate this dynamic, we can compare Al-Nabigha's responses to the recitations of Al-A'sha and Al-Khansa with his critique of Hassan ibn Thabit's performance. Al-Nabigha praised Al-Khansa, describing her as the most eloquent among jinn and humans, reflecting the convergence between Al-Khansa's poetic style and Al-Nabigha's aesthetic expectations. In terms of reception theory, we might say that Al-Khansa, in her poem, invoked a horizon of expectation that resonated with Al-Nabigha's sensibilities as both poet and critic, producing a sense of aesthetic fulfilment and emotional pleasure that led him to declare her superiority.

By contrast, Hassan ibn Thabit's recital did not satisfy Al-Nabigha's horizon of expectation, as he fell short of what the latter perceived as the poetic objective. For example, Al-khansa's lines:

"And indeed, Sakhr is such that guides take him as their model,
As if he were a beacon, atop his head a fire."

وإنَّ صَخْرًا لَتَنَاتِمُ الْهَدَاةُ بِهِ كَأَنَّهُ عِلْمٌ فِي رَأْسِهِ نَارٌ

She exaggerated the description greatly by portraying Sakhr as a towering mountain and adding that 'on his head burns a fire', an image that Al-Nabigha found

to be a novel and striking element in poetic expression. Indeed, the 'horizon of expectation' for Hassan ibn Thabit's poetic craftsmanship was markedly different from that of Al-Nabigha, who is reported to have said, "The most eloquent of people is he whose lies are most believable" (Al-Qayrawani 2000, 156). In Al-Nabigha's doctrine, poetic 'lying' is not meant to deceive or mislead but to exemplify and attain the highest degree of expressive exaggeration and imaginative elevation (Ja'far, n.d.).

This view stands in contrast with Hassan's doctrine of moderation and rhetorical truthfulness, as reflected in his verse:

And the most eloquent verse you utter

It is a verse that is recited and known to be true (Hassan, 1929).

وإن أشعرَ بيتٍ أنتَ قائلُهُ
بيتٌ يُقالُ إذا أنشدته صدقاً

As Qudamah also observed, Hassan ibn Thabit's emphasis on aligning the meaning with the truth fell short of Al-Nabigha's expectations. Al-Nabigha desired 'excess and hyperbole', replacing every meaning Hassan introduced with something grander, more vivid, or emotionally heightened (Ja'far, n.d.). As a result, he criticized Hassan and ranked him lower than Al-A'sha and Al-Khansa.

Al-Nabigha's critique of Hassan and the reasoning he offered for his judgment reveal a profound sense of disappointment and dissonance between expectation and realization. One might object to the claim that Al-Nabigha's reading represents a collective horizon of expectation by suggesting it was instead a personal, subjective interpretation rooted in his aesthetic sensibilities. This objection is valid, given Al-Nabigha's individuality and critical authority. However, one must also consider the context in which Hassan presented his poem: the arbitration setting of Souk Okaz, where Al-Nabigha sat in a tent made of animal skin, acting as a recognized judge while poets competed before him, and an audience gathered to listen and witness the evaluations.

In this public and formal context, Al-Nabigha's judgment gained legitimacy through his expertise and poetic authority and the ritualistic structure of poetic arbitration, which elevated individual interpretation into a communal evaluative framework. Therefore, his critique transcended personal opinion and came to reflect a broader 'horizon of expectation' shaped by his experience with the literary genre, his knowledge of past poetic forms and themes, and his awareness of the distinctions between poetic and practical language, as well as between the imaginative and the real.

Al-Nabigha's reception of Hassan's text resonated through time and literary tradition. It is difficult to find a work of classical Arabic criticism or literary history that does not mention it. The historical impact of his reading polarized audiences: some agreed with his assessment, others objected, some defended Hassan, while others sought to mediate between the two. However, all of these positions stemmed from Al-Nabigha's reading, which has been preserved as a paradigmatic moment of reception and continues to be studied as the response of a discerning and influential contemporary reader. One of the key benefits of this rich reception history is that it

opened the poem to multiple layers of interpretation, ensuring its continued relevance and critical engagement across generations.

Successive receptions and their stance on initial reception

Reception by grammarians

Among the first scholars to cite Hassan ibn Thabit's verse were Sibawayh, Ibn al-Sarraj, Al-Zajjaji, Al-Anbari, and Al-Astarabadi. These figures focused primarily on grammatical analysis, and thus, their reception of Hassan's verse was linguistic rather than literary or rhetorical. They employed the verse to justify using the so-called "lesser" plural form to denote multiplicity.

Sibawayh, in his chapter on "The Pluralization of the Singular," states:

"If you intend the minimum number, you pluralize it with 'ta' and open the 'ain', as in saying 'jifnah' and 'jifanat'... However, if you exceed the minimum number, you pluralize the noun on the pattern 'fi'aal'... In addition, they may also use 'ta' even when they mean many."

He then cites Hassan's verse and comments that Hassan did not intend the minimum number (Sibawayh, 1992), thus indicating that Sibawayh saw no grammatical fault in Hassan's linguistic choice. Notably, Sibawayh does not mention the arbitration story at Souk Okaz or Al-Nabigha's critique, suggesting that his concern was strictly structural rather than rhetorical.

Al-Zajjaji, however, attempted a mediating position, acknowledging that Al-Nabigha's criticism was linguistically valid and that the form "jifan" (bowls) would imply greater abundance and might have been more fitting for praise. He states:

"And as for those who criticized Hassan for 'jifanat', saying it denotes a lesser number and 'jifan' would have been more eloquent in praise because it implies a greater number he is correct, as he said" (Al-Zajjaji, 1979).

This suggests a partial alignment with Al-Nabigha's doctrine or at least an acknowledgement of the legitimacy of his rhetorical expectations. Nevertheless, Al-Zajjaji does not consider Hassan's use of "jifanat" a weakening of the poetic line, justifying that "it is not far-fetched for 'jifanat' to denote many, even if its root suggests few, owing to the overlapping of plural forms." He draws a grammatical analogy from the Qur'an, citing the verse "three menstrual periods" (Al-Baqara, 2:228), where a plural form may imply more than its structural origin.

Al-Zajjaji's reception is influenced by a 'horizon of expectation' shaped by his engagement with ancient Arabic poetry and his methodological grounding in Qur'anic grammar and philology.

Conversely, Al-Anbari adopts a position of opposition to Al-Nabigha, defending Hassan and arguing that the critique was unwarranted. He suggests Al-Nabigha's remarks were motivated by personal bias, prompted by Hassan's unimpressed or dismissive reaction to the arbitration. Al-Anbari asserts that Al-Nabigha wished to 'deflect blame' or challenge Hassan's status by finding fault. He dismisses the idea that the use of 'jifanat' implies inferiority in plurality, countering that what is pluralized with 'alif' and 'ta' can refer to both many and few. As support, he cites the Qur'anic verse:

"And they in their chambers, feeling secure" (Saba 34:37), where a plural formed with 'alif' and 'ta' denotes a large group.

Al-Anbari argues that plurality encompasses both quantity and variability. Thus, it is legitimate to use a plural form typically associated with ‘few’ to indicate ‘many,’ just as it is permissible in Arabic rhetoric to intend specificity by generality (Al-Anbari, n.d.). His broader defence reflects a belief that Al-Nabigha’s critique was more rhetorical than technical and that Arabs frequently shifted between plural forms for stylistic effect.

Moving to Al-Astarabadi’s reading, we find a notable defence and validation of Hassan ibn Thabit. However, Hassan’s justification for using “jifanat” and “asyāfunā” in response to Al-Nabigha’s critique is not grounded in the common Arab practice of substituting one grammatical construction for another. Instead, his defence is based on the relevance and contextual appropriateness of the terms to the poem’s rhetorical aim, arguing that they were purposefully and meaningfully modified in line with the overall structure of the verse.

This interpretation aligns with a well-established linguistic view among grammarians: that when a plural of paucity (e.g., *jifanat*) is accompanied by a definite article (‘al’) or made definite through genitive construction or possessive pronouns, its meaning shifts from indicating few to many. Al-Astarabadi supports this view by referencing common expressions such as “all Muslims, male and female,” where grammatical markers generalize and expand meaning (Al-Astarabadi, 1996). In Hassan’s case, the use of the definite article in “al-jifanat” and the possessive suffix “-nā” in “asyāfunā” fulfils this grammatical condition, transforming the original terms to imply abundance and grandeur, suitable for poetic praise.

According to Al-Astarabadi, this sophisticated reading represents a refined synthesis of grammatical insight and rhetorical intent, demonstrating that Hassan’s lexical choices were defensible, deliberate and effective. His argument parallels what Jauss describes as the “merging of horizons”, a process where the interpreter’s contemporary framework interacts with the text’s historical context. Al-Astarabadi, writing from a later grammatical tradition, constructed a ‘horizon of expectation’ informed by a broader understanding of linguistic flexibility and poetic convention. In doing so, he justified Hassan’s original composition and surpassed Al-Nabigha’s critique by contextualizing the verse within evolving interpretive norms.

The Reception by Critics

The critics’ opinions varied regarding Al-Nabigha’s reading of Hassan ibn Thabit’s verse. Qudamah ibn Ja’far, a prominent Abbasid critic, favoured the poetic doctrine of exaggeration and hyperbole, considering those who criticized such elements in poetry to be mistaken. He argued that the poet’s primary objective is to transform a theme through metaphor and to push the boundaries of descriptive expression. Accordingly, he faulted Al-Nabigha’s critique of Hassan, maintaining that Hassan was correct, as he held to a truthful and rhetorically sound argument (Ja’far, n.d.).

Qudamah further explained that Hassan’s use of “al-ghurr” in verse was more appropriate than Al-Nabigha’s suggested alternatives. He interpreted Hassan’s term as referring not to literal colour but to well-known glories and noble qualities, akin to phrases like “white day” or “white hand”, which metaphorically convey fame,

distinction, or generosity, not whiteness per se (Ja'far, n.d.). This reading implies that Al-Nabigha may have misinterpreted the term 'al-ghurr', reducing it to its colouristic meaning without acknowledging its rhetorical or metaphorical usage in established Arabic idiom.

Qudamah also criticized Al-Nabigha's substitution of "al-dajā" (darkness) for "al-ḍuḥā" (morning light), regarding the change as unjustified. He dismissed the reasoning based on poetic necessity, asserting that only objects already possessing brightness are capable of gleaming in daylight. Hassan's choice of "al-ḍuḥā" appropriately emphasizes the intrinsic radiance of the bowls, aligning with the metaphor of visible glory.

In this regard, Qudamah's critique reflects a reception perspective that values figurative innovation and interpretive generosity, embracing the poet's license to amplify meaning. His disagreement with Al-Nabigha signals an important shift in critical horizons, privileging metaphorical depth over literal precision and affirming the legitimacy of rhetorical flourish as a central feature of poetic eloquence.

In contrast, Qudamah refuted Al-Nabigha's preference for "al-dajā" over "al-ḍuḥā" by arguing from logic and observational reasoning. He noted that even the dimmest lights shine at night, including stars, which are always more visible in darkness and gradually disappear during the day (Ja'far, n.d.). This reflects Qudamah's incorporation of logical reasoning influenced by Greek philosophy. He also believed that Hassan did not intend "quantity" through his use of "yāqṭurn" (they drip) but instead relied on an established expression in Arabic poetic tradition. As people commonly say to describe a brave and formidable hero, "his sword drips with blood," and never "his sword runs with blood." Had Hassan used "yajrīn" (they run), it would have strayed from customary Arabic usage into an expression unrecognized by native speakers (Ja'far, n.d.).

In Qudamah's view, Hassan achieved his rhetorical aim and excelled in the register of pride and self-glorification. In this light, his word choices left no room for critique either from Al-Nabigha or others. According to Qudamah, Al-Nabigha failed to perceive this because he insisted on excess and hyperbole in Hassan's meanings while neglecting the richness and nuance inherent in Hassan's vocabulary and stylistic decisions.

Al-Suli's opinion, however, diverged from Qudamah's. In *Al-Muwaṣṣaḥ*, his retelling of the story and commentary reveals admiration for Al-Nabigha's rebuttal to Hassan's verse, viewing it as a "significant critique indicating the purity of Al-Nabigha's speech and the elegance of his poetry" (Al-Marzubani 1995, 76). Al-Suli supported the view that Hassan's word choices reflected lesser quantities. However, he still considered Al-Nabigha mistaken in criticizing the term "al-ghurr" and recommending "al-bayḍ" (the whites), holding that Hassan's selection was the nobler and stylistically superior.

As for Al-Marzubani, his aim in *Al-Muwaṣṣaḥ* was to compile many instances of poetic flaws identified by critics, often presenting varied opinions and an abundance of narratives. When discussing Hassan, he remarked:

"Some who criticized this verse in his saying 'they shine...' have been refuted, and people have argued on behalf of Hassan with what has no basis for mention."

This confirms what he previously stated in his introduction: that many poetic criticisms have been met with rebuttals by grammarians and linguistic scholars who sought to justify the poet's choices and undermine the critics' claims (Al-Marzubani, 1995). However, Al-Marzubani (1995) was not entirely convinced by those justifications. His reluctance to object openly is explained in his own words from the introduction:

"Had it not been impermissible to base an argument on something specific and then contradict it later in the details, we would have mentioned the justification for the poets in this book." Nonetheless, he ultimately sided with Al-Nabigha on specific points. For instance, when Al-Nabigha criticized Hassan for boasting about "whom you have given birth to, but not who gave birth to you," Al-Marzubani agreed, stating:

"I find no excuse for Hassan on this aspect according to the critics of poetry" (Al-Marzubani, 1995).

Al-Qurtubi, in the chapter on the validity of meanings, posits that the intended subject of praise cannot be described except by what is necessary, possible, impossible, or improbable (Al-Qurtubi, n.d.). The first two categories, necessity and possibility, are acceptable in discourse; the closer a possible description is to reality, the more it resonates with the audience and enters the realm of semantic validity. Exaggeration may occur within the bounds of the possible and the improbable, but it has no place in the realm of the impossible.

Al-Qurtubi cites Hassan's verse as evidence, suggesting that he saw merit in Al-Nabigha's critique. In his view, Al-Nabigha demanded from Hassan a form of realistic exaggeration, that is, to multiply the references to bowls and swords in a way that remained within the realm of possibility, thus faulting Hassan for falling short of what could have been poetically justified. Al-Qurtubi did not expect Hassan to exceed the bounds of logic or realism but rather to intensify the imagery within plausible limits (Al-Qurtubi, n.d.).

This interpretation implies that Al-Qurtubi's support for the doctrine of exaggeration is not absolute but measured and conditional, limited to what the audience can accept as potentially accurate or emotionally compelling. His analysis reinforces the importance of the "horizon of expectation" as a guiding principle in balancing poetic creativity with rhetorical credibility.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study examined the views of selected ancient grammarians and rhetoricians on the verse of Hassan ibn Thabit and the interpretive stance of Al-Nabigha Al-Dhubyani, who functioned as a contemporary receiver of the testimonial text. From this analysis, several key conclusions emerge:

A – The Arab receiver of poetry in ancient times was not content with passive engagement, mere admiration or disdain without critical intervention. This is evident in the poets' efforts to refine their verses before public presentation, acknowledging the discerning role of the audience in shaping poetic form and content.

B – Not all poets adhered to a single creative doctrine, nor did audiences encounter poetic texts with a unified horizon of expectation. However, there were notable commonalities in interpretive details, which explains their focus on certain

textual elements over others during moments of critique and poetic arbitration, as illustrated in the testimonial case examined.

C – The pre-Islamic poetic text should not be viewed as a closed system but rather as an open, dynamic structure that invites multiple interpretations. Its inherent indeterminacies provide fertile ground for receivers to actively participate in meaning production.

D – Contemporary reception plays a vital role in shaping the trajectory of a text's interpretive legacy. Each new reading contributes to an evolving sequence of receptions, enriching the text with additional layers of meaning shaped by the receiver's horizon, cultural background, and interpretive intentions.

E – The readings of grammarians were generally more constrained than those of rhetoricians, likely due to the distinct objectives of their disciplines. While rhetoricians engaged with the rhetorical and aesthetic dimensions of poetry, grammarians approached the text to illustrate linguistic permissibility, such as using plurals of paucity to denote abundance.

Overall, this study affirms that pre-Islamic poetic criticism was far from simplistic or subjective. It was underpinned by sophisticated aesthetic expectations, disciplinary standards, and dialogic engagement between poet and receiver. Through this interaction, the poetic text becomes a site of continual reinterpretation, shaped as much by its historical context as by the evolving sensibilities of its readers.

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ناهمگونی و افق انتظار: خوانشی در متنی پیش از اسلام

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