



# Exploring New Values For Literary Criticism: A Study Of The Literary Values Proposed By Bint Al Shati.

Dr Sameena Kausar

Assistant Professor

Maulana Azad National Urdu University

## Abstract

This article talks about the contribution of Dr Ayesha Abdul Rahman Bint al Shati to Arabic literary Criticism. The scholars have dealt with her exegesis and hermeneutics at length. Although much more attention is required to this aspect of her contribution, we can say that articles and several studies have dealt with her exegesis of the Quran. In contrast, her literary contribution has been grossly ignored. Her literary works are no less significant than any other writer of her time. It does surprise the reader; what kept the critics from talking about her contribution to the literature and criticism? This article is a humble effort to bring some glimpses of her valuable literary contribution to light.

**Keywords:** literary criticism, Bint al Shati, pre-Islamic poetry, literary values, Arabic literature

## Introduction:

This article focuses on Bint al-Shātī, whose writings crystallize some of the most salient themes of modern Arabic literature and illustrate the power of *adab* in formulating modern Islamic ethics and politics. A public intellectual, political activist, chaired professor, journalist, and *adēba* (woman of letters), Bint al-Shātī synthesized discursive trends for a broad spectrum of readers, including intellectual elites and popular audiences. Yet, in a sphere where giants like *Qudama bin Jaafar* (873-948), *Ibn e Rasheeq*, *Taha Hussain* and *Ahmad Ameen* ruled, how did a woman enter the patriarchal territory only to leave a lasting mark?!!

Issa J Boullata (1929-2019) praised Bint al-Shaṭī' as a modern interpreter whose method has many added values, both from a theological point of view, literary criticism and others. From the aspect of the feminist movement, Ruth Roded considers that Bint al-Shaṭī' is a pioneer of feminist thinking of Muslim women in the modern era.

The scholars have dealt with her exegesis and hermeneutics at length. That also cannot be said to be sufficient attention, but yes, this phase of her contribution has been given attention. In contrast, her literary contribution has been completely ignored. Her literary works are no less significant than any other writer of her time. It does surprise the reader what kept the critics from talking about her contribution to the literature and criticism. Does it mean that in the alleys of a patriarchal literature framework, women were not supposed to enter or be capable of such serious work? Her book *Qiyam Jadeedah* itself deserves to be studied critically as it seriously reflects upon the literary values in Arabic literature from the Jahili period to the modern one.

### **Bint al Shati and her book *Qiyam Jadeedah***

The singular of the word ‘*qiyam*’ is ‘*qeemah*.’ meaning values. So, what does value mean in literature? Theories of literary value fall into three categories: mimetic, expressive, and formalist. Aristotle founded the Western aesthetic tradition when he argued that poetry was 'more philosophical' than the writing of history because it showed not what had happened but, typically, the things that occurred. Shakespeare's Hamlet follows in that mimetic tradition, asserting that the purpose of theatre is to hold 'the mirror up to nature as does Samuel Johnson in his 'Preface to Shakespeare' (1765),<sup>i</sup>

The book “*Qiyam Jadeedah*” is a collection of the lectures Bint al Shati delivered at Damascus University in 1960 and published in 1961 from Dar al Maarif, Cairo. A summary of these lectures was given to the Institute of Research and Higher Arabic Studies students in 1967, which later contributed as the preliminary work for the book's second volume. At that time, this phenomenal book's writer was a Chaired Professor of Arabic Literature at The University of Ain Shams.

### **What is a Literary Value?**

To attribute value to an entity is to judge that it counts in some way and is worth something<sup>ii</sup>. For example, pleasure is a value that is derived from the text. “Thus every writer's motto reads: *mad I cannot be, sane I do not deign to be, neurotic I am*”, stated Roland Barthes in his book “The Pleasures of Text”.

“If I agree to judge a text according to pleasure, I cannot go on to say: this one is good, that bad. No awards, no "critique," for this always implies a tactical aim, a social usage, and frequently an extenuating image reservoir. I cannot apportion, imagine that the text is perfectible, ready to enter into a play of normative predicates: it is too much *this*, not enough *that*; the text (the same is true of the singing voice) can wring from me only this judgment, in no way adjectival: *that's it!* And further still: *that's it for me!* This "for me" is neither subjective nor existential, but Nietzschean ("... basically, it is always the same question: What is it for *me*? ...")<sup>iii</sup>.

Barthes calls it ‘*jouissance*’. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes argues that reading a text is more than simply taking in information or entertainment. He explains that truly understanding and undertaking a reader is to experience and reject the world. Barthes's ideology of pleasure in the text believes that the logical, orderly prescription of writing does not produce happiness in the reader. Instead, the joy of a text comes when these ideas are accepted and experienced while also being destroyed or contradicted. When sharing

and rejecting ideas of structure, language, culture, and even reality, a reader experiences the thrill of the edge. This edge or separation is the moment that all things collide. The collision produces pleasure and is the only place true happiness exists. Barthes spends the entire essay describing various edges or moments of the crash and how those moments push a reader further into pleasure.

### **Bint al Shati and literary values:**

One key feature of Bint al Shari's literary views and ideology is that tradition holds a special place in the framework of her thoughts. She looks at the Arabic and Islamic heritage with pride and gratification. She wants the new writers to focus on benefiting from these resources and furthering and advancing their values and literary parameters into the modern form and structure. This new configuration of the heritage left by our ancestors will provide us with a fantastic source of inspiration. In her opinion, the famous view about the superiority of the old over the new is a 'myth'. She believes that our literary and Islamic heritage is quite authentic and rich. The only task required is to generate modern parameters that suit the temper and taste of the time.

It was almost 12 centuries ago when *Ibn Qutaybah* (828-889 AD), the famous Islamic scholar of Persian descent, who served as a judge in the Abbasid caliphate, better known for his work on Arabic literature, refused to borrow from the old and declared "Scholarship, poetry, rhetoric is not confined to a particular era or community of people by Allah. Instead, it is there for everyone. Therefore, he converts every old to new in every age<sup>iv</sup>. *Ibn Bassām* (1058-1147) raised his voice against the blind following, inertia, and shiftlessness. His point was that innovation and perseverance are proof of life while staying lethargic, glorifying the past and being content with it in whatever form proves lifelessness. This stillness stagnates the sterile and uncontaminated river of literature<sup>v</sup>.

Referring to these literary giants, the argument *Bint al Shati* makes is that if *Ibn Qutaybah* and *Ibn Bassam* could feel this stagnation centuries ago, why can't we feel the same after a considerable gap of twelve centuries between them and us<sup>vi</sup>. *Bint al Shati* believes that the periods when literary values were being formed and created are not the most glorious periods of Arabic literature, forcing us to rethink these values and find and create the ones most suitable to our age and time<sup>vii</sup>.

Bint al Shati considers the division of poets into Jahili and Islamic by Ibn e Sallam as a critical turning point in the history of Arabic literature<sup>viii</sup>. That is when the critics started to evaluate the poetry on specific parameters, which means that literary criticism was now an organized territory which finally had some parameters to judge a work.

In her book *Qiyam Jadeedah*, Bin al Shati disagrees with scholars on various points and tries to break some stereotypes about the Jahili poets. The prevalent opinion about the Jahili poet is that society gave them so much importance that they felt isolated. Their status was unparalleled. In other words, this attention and reputation left a negative impact on the personhood of the poet. Quoting Dr Shukri Faisal's book '*tatawwur*

*al Ghazal* (The Development of Ghazal), Bint al Shati writes that the poet was just like a décor item for the tribe. He was dealing with the 'subjectivity of the poet', a crucial topic in literary circles. This means literature should mirror the artist's personhood and flow out of his soul and deep consciousness. Any poet, writer or artist playing as a puppet in the hands of societal norms is killing themselves in the process. Disagreeing with this prevalent paradigm, Bint al Shati gives us the other side of the picture and says that the poet of the Jahili tribe reflected his personhood through the tribe. He was an 'individual' in a group that enabled him and encouraged him to take up this risky and crucial task<sup>ix</sup>.

It is Bint al Shati who drew the readers' attention for the first time about the pre-Islamic poets and some of the characteristics of their poetry ignored by earlier critics. For example, they seldom use the pronoun 'I'; instead, they use 'we'. This proves that the pre-Islamic poet considers himself an indispensable part of the tribe. He comes from them; he lives with them and for them<sup>x</sup>. She quotes the '*muallaqa*' of *Amr bin Kulsoom*, the famous pre-Islamic poet, as an example. Many critics view the *muallaqa* as forged and '*manhool*' meaning perverted. Here Bint al Shati makes a strong statement that enriches the whole tradition of Arabic poetry. She says that even if we agree with the critics about the originality of the *muallaqa*, we must be able to recognize the societal norms and cohesion of the social units this piece of art represents<sup>xi</sup>.

She considers three characteristics as prerequisites for a critic:

'The attributes of the critic, then, are three:

- (1) Mindfulness, or accuracy and focus
- (2) Composure to reflection and introspection
- (3) Control of the thought process<sup>xii</sup>

In her book '*qiyam Jadeedah*' (The New Values), she discusses that the writer is free to express himself; nobody can force him to write against his will and not tell his true emotions and feelings, yet it is expected from him to adhere to the values of the society.

## Bibliography

- Steven Connor. (1991) On and of literary value: A reply to Antony Easthope. *Textual Practice* 5:3
- R. McGregor, *The Value of Literature* (RLI, 2016)
- Barthes, Roland, *The Pleasures of the Text*, Translated by Richard Miller, (Hill and Wong, New York, 1975)
- Qutaybah, *Ibn, Al Sher wa Alshuaraā*, ed. Ahmad Mohammad Shakir (Cairo, Dar ul Maarif). 1958

- Aishah Abd Rahman Bint al-Shati, *Qiyam Jadeedah lil Adab il Arabi al Muaasir*,1, (Cairo: Dar al-Maarif, 1970)
- Bassam, Ibn, *al Zakheerah fi Mahasin e Ahl e Madeena*, (Cairo:1939)
- Al Jundi, Anwar, *Al musajalat wa almaarik al adabiyyah*,Second edition,(Cairo:Maktabat al Aadab,2008)

<sup>i</sup> Steven Connor. (1991) On and of literary value: A reply to Antony Easthope. *Textual Practice* 5:3, pages 326-333.

<sup>ii</sup> R. McGregor, *The Value of Literature* (RLI, 2016)

<sup>iii</sup> Barthes, Roland, *The Pleasures of the Text*, Translated by Richard Miller,(Hill and Wong, New York,1975).13

<sup>iv</sup> Qutaybah, *Ibn, Al Sher wa Alshuraaā*, ed. Ahmad Mohammad Shakir (Cairo, Dar ul Maarif).1958

<sup>v</sup> Bassam, Ibn, *al Zakheerah fi Mahasin e Ahl e Madeena*, (Cairo:1939)

<sup>vi</sup> Aishah Abd Rahman Bint al-Shati, *Qiyam Jadeedah lil Adab il Arabi al Muaasir*,1, (Cairo: Dar al-Maarif, 1970). 12.

<sup>vii</sup> ibid

<sup>viii</sup> Aishah Abd Rahman Bint al-Shati, *Qiyam Jadeedah lil Adab il Arabi al Muaasir*,1, (Cairo: Dar al-Maarif, 1970).83

<sup>ix</sup> ibid,35

<sup>x</sup> ibid,36

<sup>xi</sup> ibid,37

<sup>xii</sup> Al Jundi, Anwar, *Al musajalat wa almaarik al adabiyyah*,Second edition,(Cairo:Maktabat al Aadab,2008)138

