

THE SEMANTICS OF ADAB IN ARABIC

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Adab in pre-Islam

The history of the word *adab* (أَدَب) reflects "the evolution of Arab culture from its pre-Islamic origins to our own day"¹ as Italian orientalist F. Gabrieli said. It seems to me that the word was not common in pre-Islamic poetry, for I tried to find an impact of the Mesopotamian tragedy, namely "*Adaba*" on poetry, without finding any cogent evidence or conclusive track. Arab lexicographers scrutinized the pre-Islamic texts and found the word and some derivations of the verb "*adaba*" (أَدَب), as follows:

* This paper was originally written for presentation at ISTACs 1994 inaugural symposium on Islām and the Challenge of Modernity. Though not presented, the paper provides useful analysis on the semantics of *adab*, much of which has been based on Professor al-Attas' theories on the subject, especially those outlined in his *The Concept of Education in Islām* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1991, first impression 1980). As Professor Nasrat has said, "Professor al-Attas is greatly concerned with the momentous problems facing the Islamic world, especially the cultural and educational problems. He believes that ignorance is the scourge of the Muslim's backwardness, that Western philosophy and some sciences have confused Muslims and non-Muslims as well, and that all this will lead man to destruction. Secularism and modernity are, to him, the root of man's tribulation, and that man's salvation lies in Islam. Modern Muslim scholars are being confronted with the thorny hedge of terminologies, especially scholars who intend to express Islamic knowledge in a European language. What, for instance, is the Islamic term for "education", which in English means "training or instructing someone intellectually, morally, and socially"? Is *al-tarbiyah*, as is being used in Arab countries today, the correct term to convey the meaning of "education" according to the Islamic perspective? This translation has not convinced him, as he has shown in his book *The*

1. *Adab* (أَدَب): Used with the sea, e.g. "The *adab* of the sea" (أَدَبُ الْبَحْرِ) which means: the wavy sea, and the profusion of its water.²
2. *Adb* (أَدَب) or *idb*³ (إِدَب): Used to mean "the marvellous" (الْعَجَب).
3. *Ādib* (أَدِيب): The active participle of the past tense "*adaba*" (أَدَب) which means: the host, or anyone who invites to a banquet.⁵

The lexicographers quoted the saying of the pre-Islamic poet, Ṭarafah b. al-ʿAbd, in his distich:

Concept of Education in Islām; rather, he found that *al-taʿdīb* is the proper and exact translation of the meaning of education...He therefore discusses *adab* in a thorough manner, defining it as "the discipline of body, mind and soul; the discipline that assures the recognition and acknowledgement of one's proper place in relation to one's physical, intellectual and spiritual capacities and potentials; the recognition and acknowledgement of the reality that knowledge and being are ordered hierarchically according to their various levels (*marātib*) and degrees (*darajāt*)." *(The Concept of Education in Islām, ibid., page 22). [Editor's note]*

- ¹ *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (New edition), "Adab", I: 175.
- ² Al-Zabīdī, *Tāj al-ʿArūs*, ed. ʿAlī Hilālī (Beirut: Dār al-Hidāyah), 2: 14; Al-Azhārī, *Tahdhīb al-Lughah*, ed. Yaʿqūb ʿAbd al-Nabī (Cairo: al-Dār al-Miṣriyyah), 14: 209; Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir), 1: 207.
- ³ Ibn Fāris, *Mujmal al-Lughah*, ed. Zahīd ʿAbd al-Muḥsin Sulṭān (Beirut: Muʾassasah al-Risālah), 1: 90. Ibn Fāris is the sole lexicographer who recorded this paradigm in his dictionary.
- ⁴ Al-Azhārī, op. cit., 208; Al-Jawharī, *al-Ṣiḥah*, ed. Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Ghafūr ʿAṭṭār (Beirut: Dār al-ʿIlm li al-Malāyīn), 1: 86; Ibn Manẓūr, op. cit., 207.
- ⁵ Al-Azhārī, op. cit., 209; Al-Jawharī, op. cit., 86; Ibn Manẓūr, op. cit., 207; Al-Zabīdī, op. cit., 14; Ibn Fāris, op. cit., 90; Al-Fairūzābādī, *al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah) 1: 47.