

## Towards understanding the nature of digression in the writings of al-Jaahiz: Few pages from the introductory chapter of *Kitaab al-Bayaan wa al-Tabyeen*, the book of eloquence and exposition as a model

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### ABSTRACT

The writing style of al-Jaahiz (d. 869 CE), one of the most successful and popular prose writers of Arab history, is sometimes pedagogically made questionable; for al-Jaahiz comparatively digresses to a great extent. Some literary critics hold that the aim of his digressions is nothing but to digress. Is his digression a mere digression, void of art and therefore methodically disorganised? Is there any artistic scheme functional behind it? What does this style emanate from? To lay bare these facts, this article aims to grapple to find the answers to aforesaid questions and therefore a few pages from the introductory chapter of his famous work on Arabic rhetoric titled *kitaab al-Bayaan wa al-Tabyeen* are chosen as a model; for style and stylistics are both closely connected to rhetoric. Accordingly, this article is divided into 5 sections: first, an introduction; second, the concept of digression and its rhetorical merits; third, the source, aim and framework of digression in al-Jaahiz's works; fourth, an analysis of text extracted from the book *al-Bayaan wa al-Tabyeen* to discern the nature of this stylistic device along with its artistic underpinning; and, finally, a conclusion containing the findings. The article follows inductive and qualitative methods to obtain its results. Foremost among these results is that there is an underlying chain pattern in his digressions. It is hoped that this research would benefit all those who are involved in the studies of style and stylistics, in general, and in the writing style of al-Jaahiz, in particular.

**Keywords:** *digression, analysis, nature, writings of al-Jaahiz, kitaab al-Bayaan wa al-Tabyeen*

### 1. Introduction:

Digression is a useful rhetorical device which plays multiple roles in discourse and enriches it in various ways. It usually appears a lot in the longer pieces of writing such as novels, plays, films, epics, etc. it also distinctly takes up much space in sermons, oratories and all other

effective oral communications. However, in expository writings, the usage of this literary tool is relatively little. But during the Abbasid period (750-1258 CE) Abu ‘Uthman al-Jaahiz (d. 869 CA) - an intellectual colossus, the first *Shaikh* or master of Arabic rhetoric and “one of the finest and most famous writers in the history of Arabic prose writing” [Arifin, 2014, 68] - plentifully employed this literary tool in his writings, especially in his rhetorical masterpiece titled *Kitaab al-Bayaan wa al-Tabyeen, the book of eloquence and exposition*. However, the digressions in this book are not randomly deployed. Rather, they have a chain conceptual pattern. To prove this fact, the following discussion will open with the definition of digression along with its stylistic benefits. Then it will turn to deal with the source, aim and outline of the digression in al-Jaahiz’s writing as a whole. And finally, it will come to the core part of the article, i.e., the analysis of a few pages from the sample book to elicit the nature and underpinning of digression followed by the conclusion containing the findings. So here starts the discussion:

## 2. Digression and its rhetorical positivity:

It appears that there are, roughly, two different concepts of digression found in English and Arabic treatises written on rhetoric and literary theories. The first one only restricts it to the function of moving away from the main topic, as is seen in Morner and Rausche’s [1998, p. 56] following statement where they say that digression is “A portion of speech or written work that interrupts the development of the theme or plot”. Likewise, Cuddon [2014, p. 205] defines it as “Material not strictly relevant to the main theme or plot of a work”.

However, the second concept takes the function of resumption into consideration and therefore incorporates it into the form of digression. Renowned Arab rhetorician al-Sayyid Ahmad al-Hashemi (d. 1943 CE) [213, p. 302] holds up this point of view and therefore, to define digression as a rhetorical device, he says: “the speaker goes away from the subject of discussion and gets involved in another which is related to the subject at hand and then they return to the first one to complete it”. To exemplify this rhetorical device, he then brings forth the following verses from the poems of al-Samuel (d. 560 CA):

وإنا أناسٌ لا نرى القتلَ سُبَّةً      إذا رآته عامِرٌ وسُلُوُ  
يُفَرِّبُ حُبُّ المَوْتِ أَجَالَنَا لَنَا      وتكرهُه أجالهم فتتطوُلُ  
وَمَا مَاتَ مِنَّا سَيِّدٌ حَنَفَ أَنفِهِ      ولا طُلَّ مِنَّا حَيْثُ كَانَ قَتِيلُ

And verily we are the men who do not see killing as shame  
whereas Amir and Salul see so.  
Our love of death nears our end  
whereas their life span hates it, so it elongates.  
No chief from amongst us died a natural death  
nor did go the blood of anyone killed from us in vain.  
[Urwa & al-Samuel, n.d, p. 90]

Here, al-Hashemi observes that the poet has delivered a panegyric on the bravery of his clan, which is the theme of the poem in question. However, the poet has digressed from the theme

temporarily and dealt with two other clans, namely Amir and Salul, to satirize them exposing their cowardice. And after that, he has returned to the theme. And so, the whole process of moving away from the theme and resuming is, according to him, a digression [p. 302].

However, if his argument is accepted then the whole text of every drama, novel and story containing some instances of digression would be pigeonholed as a piece of digression; for, according to al-Hashemi, digression encompasses going off the track and coming back to it again. If this is so, there may not be found any digression-free text, because every drama, novel and story contains some digressions and resumption both. But, to al-Hashemi, resumption is also considered a part of digression which is as good as categorising the whole text as a digression. Therefore, this point of view cannot be declared flawless; for it is not underpinned by careful observation and critical acumen.

Furthermore, the Arabic term used for the meaning of digression (الاستطراد) *al-istitraad*, which is derived from the lexical root (ط-ر-د), does not support al-Hashemi's point of view either; for the lexical root of the word only means driving -someone or something- away from something [Ibn Manjur, 2003, vol. 5, p.580]; and, as such, the verb (اسْتَطْرَدَ) *istatradā* was primarily used in the context of battle when a cavalier, as a trick, makes his enemy soldier chase after him, and in this way, he drags him further away from his band of soldiers and pushes him towards his people, so that he can finally attack him [ibid, p.581]. So, the verb (اسْتَطْرَدَ) *istatradā* here is only used to give the meaning of pushing or driving the enemy away; nothing more. Similarly, a speaker or a writer digresses only when they wish their audiences to get off track. It does not, therefore, necessarily mean that the speaker or the writer should come back to the main topic afterwards. What if a writer or a speaker puts a digressional comment in the last sentence of the discourse/narrative? Should it not be regarded as a digression then?!

In view of this weakness in the second concept, we are therefore taking recourse to the first concept which is upheld by Morner, Rauche and Cuddon, where the emphasis is apparently put on two components, namely irrelevance and interruption. We said "apparently"; for if we take a closer look again and delve deeply into the components of their definitions, it will be evident that the central point around which the definitions revolve is to leave the main theme or plot in the course of speaking or writing behind and take up something which is not relevant to it. And it is also very explicit that everything that interrupts sticking to the main theme or plot in the course of speaking or writing is known as irrelevance.

Thus, in the broader sense, it can be said that everything which is not strictly relevant to the main theme or plot or subject at hand; or which is not a total non sequitur and is, therefore, not completely new and different from the subject in question is a digression.

However, although the concept of digression may not be seen by some critics as a positive and effective rhetorical device for discourse, it does have a bunch of advantages which can turn a discourse into an animated, picturesque and productive one. And these advantages are not necessarily restricted to the author or the reader or the text alone, but all these three have a fair slice of the cake in this respect.

As for the author, he/she can derive much benefit from digressions to yield a list, present personal anecdotes, tackle a question from another angle, provide research-based information

regarding the subject in question, give definitions of technical terms, refer the audience to a published work dealing the same topic, illuminate and illustrate the issue in hand, preach any dogma or doctrine, philosophize any idea and so on [Morner and Rausche, p. 56; Kristie, 2018, n.p.; Smith, 2019, n.p.].

And again, the writer, especially in a novel, sometimes needs to adopt the stream-of-consciousness style to portray “the internal perspective and thoughts of a central character” [Wales, 2011, p. 394]. And the ideal way for the novelist to do so is to retreat into the shell of digression.

Likewise, if the writer brings forth comedy then he/she must follow the digressive and non-linear style; for comedy tends to “parentheses, excess, running with a gag for as long as it’s funny” [Hornby, 2011, p. ix], as is found in the writings of Charles Dickens (d. 1870).

In any case, if the writer is a prodigiously gifted pundit then digression, on his/her part, could be a natural stream of expression which can turn off the highway and take any subway at any given time. In addition, if the author, by his/her extensive knowledge, wants to make a good impression on the audience then digression can provide attractive and wide premises to sever this purpose.

As regards the narrative/discourse, it brings about diversity and dynamism through digression; for digression juxtaposes multitudinous elements which extend the concomitants of the genre at hand and therefore give it a shape which is full of life and motion. In contrast, a linear and non-digressive narrative/text may lack multiplicity in elements, thereby making the discourse unappealing, especially when it’s loosely structured.

As to the readers, digression helps them not to lose their patience and not to be bored when the discourse goes on longer than usual; for even “singing voices, beautiful songs and the eloquent musical sounds of chordophones are tiring when they continue for a long time, whereas they are actually for the sake of recreation and comfort. However, if this comfort stays longer it causes inattention.” [al-Jaahiz, 2003, 3/4].

Thus, depending on the previous discussion, it can firmly be said that digression is a useful stylistic device which can play different roles liked to the author, text and reader at once. However, many critics, e.g. Carra de Vaus (d. 1953) [King Saud University, 1992] censure al-Jaahiz for his excessive digressive tendency in his writings, though there are many positive aspects found in the proper application of this device to a discourse. Therefore, further queries and examinations in this matter are highly needed. In the following section, we will therefore deal with the causes of this prodigality that lead some critics to lampoon his style.

### **3. Digression in the works of al-Jaahiz: Source, aim and outline**

The readers of al-Jaahiz do not have to find themselves on a long tedious journey to unearth the whys and wherefores of this stylistic tool which gave al-Jaahiz an impulse to adopt this technique of recurring swerve in his writings. For al-Jaahiz himself reveals the ground for choosing this style and makes his position very clear on it in his two widely celebrated works “*al-Hayawaan*” and “*al-Bayaan wa al-Tabyeen*” respectively:

As for “*al-Hayawaan*” [2003, 3/3-4] he, for example, says:

“I have decided - and Allah Himself is the inspirer and guide- to embellish this book and to split it into chapters with a variety of rare pieces of poetry and diverse discourses in order for the reader to move from one theme to another and from one form to another; for I have observed that even singing voices, beautiful songs and the eloquent musical sounds of chordophones are tiring when they continue for a long time, whereas they are actually for the sake of recreation and comfort. However, if this comfort stays longer, it causes inattention. So, when the predecessors [writers] followed this method [digression] to write booklets, then this [style] would be the most suitable way to adopt [especially] when the size of the book is enormous. [It should be mentioned here that] The only objective of all these is that you [readers] can derive benefits”.

In another place in the same book [ibid, 1/64], he goes on to say that this style belongs to the pundits and scholars and therefore he does not see any silliness in employing this.

As to his second masterpiece entitled: “*al-Bayaan wa al-Tabyeen*” [2007, 3/591], which is the principal concern of this article, he echoes the view on digression he held in his previous work, that is to say, *al-Hayawan* and suggests that the authors should apply the same device, i.e. digression particularly when the books are enormous. He says, “The right method to follow in a voluminous book is that the author will heal the [dying] reading activity of the reader [so that it may not cease to exist] and draw them towards their part of activity [reading activity] by means of some stratagems. One way of these is that the author [for example] moves the reader from one thing to another and from one theme to another. However, he should not make the reader exit entirely from the subject in question and from the greater part of the science being dealt with”.

Thus, al-Jaahiz has presented us with a very clear and explicit idea about his digression wherein he has mentioned the source and reason of his inspiration for this particular stylistic device, that is to say, it is the pundits who first employed this tool in their booklets and thus left the door wide open to him to enter and utilize. He has also provided the aim of this rhetorical exercise which is to hold the reader’s attention to their reading activity by means of unfolding a wide range of related topics containing different tastes and flavours that can ensure extra pleasure whilst reading. Furthermore, he has laid down a general rule for the authors as to how to properly utilize digression in which the authors are suggested to keep themselves restricted to something which is, in one way or another, linked to the main idea at hand and not to exceed the greater area of it by any means.

However, despite his views and comments, which are scattered over the vast volumes of his two masterpieces, i.e., *al-Hayawaan* and *al-Bayaan wa al-Tabyeen*, show some landmarks in the history of digression, they lack an intrinsic part of it which is that they do not specify to what extent digression can be seen as a natural and acceptable stylistic device. In other words, they do not shed light on the excessive length of digression which may transform it into a mere repulsive stream of wording or which may lead to boredom. But there may be a hint in *al-Bayaan wa al-Tabyeen* which only suggests where to slide from the topic in question and hold forth at a greater length and where to adopt it at a lesser length, without prescribing any definite degree of digression which can be suitable for each context. He says: “In the book of *al-Hayawaan*, my practice was to allocate ten pages in every section to the pieces of poetry said

by nomadic Arabs and to other different rare poems so that when you read them you will be delighted. Therefore, I would like this book [*al-Bayaan wa al-Tabyeen*] to be more abundant in that, if Allah wills” [2007, 3/561].

Here, the plan was to leave ten pages for a variety of poems to be inserted into every section of *al-Hayawaan, the book of animals*, whereas the book was particularly written on animals; not on literary issues. Therefore, it can easily be deduced that the presence of poetry in *al-Hayawaan, the book of animals* is but a form of digression adopted with a view to ensuring pleasure for the readers. However, according to his scheme, the number of poems in *al-Hayawaan, the book of animals* in proportion to that of *al-Bayaan wa al-Tabyeen, the book of eloquence and exposition* is supposed to be of a much lesser extent. The reason is not disclosed and elucidated by al-Jaahiz; for it is self-evident and quite obvious to discern, which is that the title of the book itself determines the proportion of digression to be used in it. Consequently, poetry would be an essential digressive element of *al-Bayaan wa al-Tabyeen, the book of eloquence and exposition*; for the title of the book is a hundred times more appropriate for it compared to that of the previous one.

Nonetheless, no discussion or even a hint regarding digression length is found in those works. And, in a similar way, no discussion is made on the nature of this stylistic device with which he plans to adorn his works. As for the digression length, it is not our present concern in this article, because it requires special attention, meticulous observation and deep analysis. Large-scale research may be separately conducted on this issue. As with the nature of his digression, especially in *al-Bayaan wa al-Tabyeen, the book of eloquence and exposition*, it will be discussed in the following section:

#### **4. In search of the nature of digression in the writings of al-Jaahiz through a few introductory pages of *Kitaab al-Bayaan wa al-Tabyeen, the book of eloquence and exposition*:**

Before dealing with the text analysis of the book it is necessary to present a brief overview of it so as to cast light on its significance and distinctiveness from literary, rhetorical, critical, social and historical points of view. Therefore, a very short account of the book is given below:

##### **4.1 *Al-Bayaan wa al-Tabyeen*: A brief overview**

Comprised of three parts, whereof the first part was completed during al-Jaahiz’s acquaintance with Ahmad ibn Abi Du’ad (d. 854 CE) and was therefore dedicated to him [al-Hamawi, 1993, 5/2118]; and of which the second and third parts were completed later in life, the book is essentially written on the manifestations of eloquence and rhetorical supremacy attained by Arabs from the pre-Islamic era up to al-Jahid’s time. It is also considered one of the most authentic and one of the largest resources of poetry, oratory, letters and conversations recorded during that time [King Saud University, 1992, p. 98]. Suffice it to say that if this book was not written or was lost the way many of his treatises and epistles were fated to be, Arabic rhetoric and literary theory would not blossom, flourish, stand strong and overwhelm in the way they are today. Similarly, a great amount of poems, poetry criticism and literary history would be lost and, in that way, it would create a scholastic vacuum which could not be filled by any means whatsoever. Proof of this can, for example, be found in Ibn Khaldun’s (d. 1406 CE)

[1988, 1/763] historic comment on the tremendous effect and wide acceptance of this book amongst the literati and experts. He says: “We have heard from our masters during the academic classes that the grounds and pillars of this art [literature] are 4 books: *Adab al-Kuttab* by Ibn Qutaiba, *Kitaab al-Kaamil* by al-Mubarrid, *Kitaab al-Bayan wa al-Tabyeen* by al-Jaahiz and *Kitaab al-Nawaadir* by Abu Ali”. Therefore, the book at hand is of great importance not only in terms of presenting al-Jaahiz’s theories, thoughts and criticisms regarding prose, poetry and eloquence but also in respect of preserving Arab history, culture and heritage.

#### **4.2 An analytical reading of the first few pages of *Kitaab al-Bayaan wa al-Tabyeen*, the book of eloquence and exposition to infer the nature of al-Jaahiz’s digression style:**

As we have clarified earlier that al-Jaahiz did not touch upon the nature of digression he preferred to employ, though he suffused his books, especially *al-Hayawaan* and *al-Bayaan* with this stylistic device to the extent that he was marked out as an extreme digressionist.

Now, according to the definition of digression which we have arrived at in the second section of this article, and in conformity to the views of al-Jaahiz on digression which we have dealt with in the third section, it has appeared that wandering from the subject/theme at hand into something which is within the greater part of it, i.e., which has a connection to it, is a digression, though it interrupts the natural thread of the discourse.

Thus, there are two points to be met to become a digression; a deviation from the topic at hand and turning to something which is loosely-not strictly- related to it.

Hence, depending on these two intrinsic elements we will now carry out an analytic reading of the first few pages of *Kitaab al-Bayaan wa al-Tabyeen*, the book of eloquence and exposition and try to make some inferences regarding the nature of al-Jaahiz’s digression.

So, the readers of *al-Bayaan* will find the following para as a way of a preamble:

"اللهمَّ إِنَّا نَعُوذُ بِكَ مِنْ فِتْنَةِ الْقَوْلِ كَمَا نَعُوذُ بِكَ مِنْ فِتْنَةِ الْعَمَلِ، وَنَعُوذُ بِكَ مِنَ التَّكَلُّفِ لِمَا لَا نَحْسُنُ كَمَا نَعُوذُ بِكَ مِنَ الْعُجْبِ بِمَا نَحْسُنُ، وَنَعُوذُ بِكَ مِنَ السَّلَاطَةِ وَالْهَدْرِ، كَمَا نَعُوذُ بِكَ مِنَ الْعِيِّ وَالْحَصْرِ."

“O, Allah! Verily we take refuge in you from the trial of saying, as we seek refuge in you from the trial of doing. We take refuge in you from the affectation of what we do not perform well, as we seek refuge in you from the self-conceit regarding what we perform well. We take refuge in you from impertinent and nonsense talk, as we seek refuge in you from inarticulacy and aphasia” [2007, 1/7].

Now, at this point, the readers are supposed to see either the phrase: “أما بعد” *Amma ba’du* or “وبعد” *wa baudu* which means “and the following”- after which the authors usually begin to take up the subject of the book; or they are supposed to anticipate that the author will go straight to the subject using جملة استئنافية *jumla isti’nafiyya*, which generally brings forth a new piece of information or a new theme “without any syntactical relation to the previous sentence” [Ibn Hishaam, 2010, p. 363].

However, al-Hajiz has followed neither of these styles. Rather, to illustrate the last two imperfections, i.e., inarticulacy and aphasia, which he has previously sought Allah’s shelter

from, and to elucidate how repulsively Arabs looked at these, he draws upon a bunch of verses said by different poets regarding inarticulacy and aphasia. So the next sentence he starts with is the following:

وقديماً ما تعوذوا بالله من شرهما وتضرعوا إلى الله في السلامة منهما. وقد قال النمر بن تولب: ما جاء في العي:

أَعِدُّنِي رَبِّ مِنْ حَصْرٍ وَعَيٍّْ  
وَمِنْ نَفْسٍ أَعَالِجُهَا عِلَاجًا

“And Historically, Arabs took refuge in Allah from the evil of them [inarticulacy and aphasia] and entreated Him to save them from them. [, for instance,] Namir bin Taulab (d.635 CA) said- which is related to inarticulacy-:

Protect me my Lord from aphasia and inarticulacy  
and from the soul I nurse and treat [2007, 1/7-8]

Following this, without resuming the theme he has begun with, al-Jaahiz has come across with 5 more verses said by 5 different poets, each of which relates to inarticulacy with the exception of that which is said by Abu Dhuiab al-Hudhali (d. 648 CA); for apparently, it relates to aphasia, albeit the word *حصر* *Hasir* (the person who is afflicted by aphasia) in the verse is used in an exaggerated way and therefore it figuratively denotes *عِي* ‘*Ayiyy* (the person who is suffering from inarticulacy).

Up to now, except for the short imploring prelude, the talk is going on about a certain defective quality; that is, inarticulacy. However, in the 5th verse, which is said by a poet who composed it in *بحر الرجز* *Rajz metre* -al-Jaahiz did not mention his name-, the last line goes as follows:

وَلَا عَيٍّْ بِابْتِنَاءِ الْمَجْدِ

“Neither is (he) unable to build the glory” [2007, 1/8].

Here, in this line, the word “عِي” gives the secondary meaning - not the primary one which has been dealt with so far- which is *being unable to do something*; because the phrasal verb *عِي* *عَجَزَ عَنْهُ* means *to become unable to perform his task/job, etc.* [al-Ma’luf, 2003, p.542]. So the meaning here has taken a new and wide turn from specification, i.e., *to be unable to articulate*, to generalization, i.e., *to be unable to do something*. And this unexpected shifting in the meanings of example verses serves as a conducive to a further digression in al-Jaahiz’s mind and therefore he now looks for a verse that is connected to an encompassing generalized meaning of the word, i.e. *to be unable to do something* and is far away from and is, by no means, related to inarticulacy. So he puts forth a new verse and says:

وهذا كقول بشّار الأعمى:

وَعَيُّْ الْفِعَالِ كَعَيِّْ الْمَقَالِ  
وَفِي الصَّمْتِ عَيٌّْ كَعَيِّْ الْكَلِمِ

“And this [the previous verse] resembles what Bashhar the blind (d. 784 CA) said:

And failing to do is like failing to talk



and there is a failure in silence as there is a failure in words” [ibid].

Here, by saying “And this resembles what...” as a second digression cue beginning with *واو الاستئناف waau al-Isti'naaf* al-Jaahiz has delved into a new concept and therefore centred his focus on two different flaws: failure in tasks and failure in silence. And each of these flaws spontaneously sets off al-Jaahiz’s extraordinary memory waves which result in triggering off two more digressions. So the third digression comes like this:

وهذا المذهب شبيه بما ذهب إليه شُتيم بن حُوَيْلِد في قوله:

وَلَا يَشْعُبُونَ الصَّدْعَ بَعْدَ تَفَاقُهِمْ  
وَفِي رَفْقِ أَيْدِيكُمْ لِذِي الصَّدْعِ شَاعِبٌ

“And this idea is the same as that of Shutaim bin Khuwailid – a Jahili poet- who said:

And they cannot settle the difference after it has reached the pic  
whereas in your hands lies the settlement for the differing” [ibid, 1/9]

Here also al-Jhaiz has used *واو الاستئناف waau al-Isti'naaf* at the beginning of his third digression cue to signal a further shifting in meaning and accordingly mentioned the verse based on the new meaning related to the failure in performing tasks; for the verse tells about failing to settle the difference between people.

The fourth digression, which in this case the second digression stemmed from the verse attributed to Bashhar the blind, is about the demerit of silence. So al-Jaahiz, after presenting a stanza and a verse in support of the meaning of failure in performance, now sets about steering his astonishing memory waves towards the poems that portray the Arabs’ negative stance on the demerit of silence. Subsequently, the first verse coming out of his huge computer-like memory is that which is attributed to Uhaiha bin al-Julah (d. 498 CA). Here also, like the previous three digressions, Al-Jaahiz has used *واو الاستئناف waau al-Isti'naaf* at the beginning of the digression cure and says:

وقالوا في الصمت كقولهم في المنطق. قال أحيحة بن الجلاح:

وَالصَّمْتُ أَحْسَنُ بِالْفَتَى  
مَا لَمْ يَكُنْ عَيٌّْ يَشِيئُهُ

“And they [Arabs] talked about silence as they talked about utterance. [, for example,] Uhaiha bin al-Julah (d. 497 CE) said:

And silence is the best way for the youth  
until inarticulacy discredits him [ibid, 1/9]

Hence, according to the Arabs, the virtue of silence is good as long as someone is free of inarticulacy. In contrast, if someone has trouble with articulacy then his/her silence is seen as a flaw and therefore regarded as a discredit.

However, al-Jaahiz continues to present names of different poets including some instances of their poems relating to the topic at hand, i.e., demerits of silence and, in this way, he happens to come to an Umayyad poet named Humaid (d. n.d.) who, in the course of describing the dreadful effect of silence that has changed someone who was previously renowned as a highly articulate young man to an inarticulate man, mentions two famous people amongst Arabs, one of whom is famous for articulacy and the other for inarticulacy. Thereupon, al-Jaahiz goes for another digression to shed some light on these two men. And thus the first series of digressions ends.

Incidentally, in the fifth digression, which also marks the end of the first round of digressions in *al-Bayaan*, al-Jaahiz has not employed *واو الاستئناف waau al-Isti'naaf*. Rather, he has used *جملة استئنافية Jumlah Istinaafiyyah* or an opening sentence without *واو Wau*, perhaps to indicate in an oblique way that the process of digression that has started with *واو الاستئناف waau al-Isti'naaf* just after the short prelude has, for the time being, come to an end. For this *واو waau*, whatever name it takes, is primarily used to link one sentence to another and so it remains [al-Jurjaani, 2004, p.214].

Thus, by presenting the historical fact involving the Arabs' negative attitude towards inarticulacy and aphasia, al-Jaahiz has produced his first digression before the audience and thus started to employ this stylistic device from the very beginning of the book. This sudden and subtle shift counts as a digression mostly for two reasons: first, al-Jaahiz interrupts the theme of the short prelude which was to make sincere supplications to Allah, the Most Glorified and Most High, to be safe from certain flaws and imperfections; second, he turns to concentrate on two imperfections in particular with a bunch of different verses which is tantamount to going into the detail of something that is not strictly related to the theme at hand. In addition, the verses that have been presented here to establish the fact that the Arabs had long detested inarticulacy, aphasia, failure in performing tasks and maintaining silence due to inarticulacy are all as good as referring to published works in the discourse which is also generally regarded as a digression [Morner and Rausche, 1988; Kristie, 2018, n.p.; Smith, 2019, n.p.].

Now, we would like to take a different angle to look into the matter so that it would be easier to assimilate and discern how the digression has started in *al-Bayaan* so as to get hold of the delicate thread of al-Jaahiz's digression style. Let us think about an author/lecturer who starts his/her discourse in the following way:

I would like to be free from **A**. Likewise, I would like to be free from **B**. I want to be free of **C**. Similarly, I want to be free of **D**. I would like to be free from **E**. In the same way, I want to be free from **F**. You might be interested to know that, **E** and **F** have long been despised by **G**. A poet named **X** once said in this connection...

Another poet named **Y** is found to have said...

Great poet **Z** said...

The similarity between the aforesaid example text and the extract taken from the introductory chapter of *Kitaab al-Bayaan wa al-Tabyeen* will become evident when A, B, C, D, E and F are replaced with any words denoting imperfections and, in a similar way, G, X, Y and Z are

substituted with any proper nouns indicating persons except for G; for it should be supplanted by a noun denoting a nation or a community.

The reader can easily understand that the moment the imaginary author/lecturer has started the 7th sentence, i.e., “You might be interested to know ...”, he/she has just deviated from the main theme to something which is not strictly related to it and thereby causing an interruption. The only difference between the example text and the extract from *al-Bayaan* is that the imaginary author/lecturer has utilized here a clause “You might be interested to know ...” which is, in fact, a digression cue, whereas al-Jaahiz has used a particle, namely, *واو الاستئناف*, *Waa al-Istinaaf* as a digression cue followed by a sentence indicating a change of course.

Now that it is evident that, al-Jaahiz has started deploying this stylistic tool from the beginning of his book, it seems now to be appropriate to take the next step; that is, finding the nature of this stylistic device in his writings.

To garner this fact, a brief recapitulation of our textual analysis would be helpful. We have seen that al-Jaahiz has first shifted from his short supplication-like-forwarding speech primarily to two flaws, namely inarticulacy and aphasia. And these two flaws are exemplified with different verses. The last verse of these, which is attributed to a poet unnamed, represents a different meaning of the word “عِي” which is *to be unable to build honour*. To give examples of this wider meaning, al-Jaahiz further plunges into verses representing the wider usage of the word which leads him to a verse attributed to Bashhar bin Burd wherein he is attracted to two more different meanings of the word, namely, failure in tasks and failure in silence. Consequently, al-Jaahiz, by means of digression, first drags into the current theme some verses that depict the meaning of *failing to perform tasks* and then brings a bunch of verses that portray the *demerit of silence* respectively. After that, while naming poets along with their verses/stanzas related to the demerit of silence, al-Jaahiz comes across a poet named Humaid who mentioned in one of his poems two famous men of Arabs which leads al-Jaahiz to produce another digression to throw some light on these two people. And with that, he puts an end to the first sequence of digressions.

So the nature of digressions in the excerpt from *Kitaab al-Bayaan wa al-Tabyeen* appears to be a chain scheme in which every digression is linked to the previous and following one. In other words, here, digression begets digression. And this is how the discourse in the writings of al-Jaahiz, especially *Kitaab al-Bayaan wa al-Tabyeen* meanders into digressions, drags itself out and becomes informative and heterogeneous to gather the momentum for it to reach the end and to take the banalities away from the reader at once.

Notwithstanding, the perpetual meanderings in any discourse are sometimes proved to be distracting and therefore rebarbative for the audience. Thus, failing to have good timing in resumption on the author’s part is, in fact, detrimental to the image of the author and thus vulgarizes the discourse too.

Whatever the case may be, somewhere along the line in his pursuit of obtaining all available knowledge in his time, al-Jaahiz must have come into contact with a certain phenomenon that induced him, consciously or subconsciously, to develop this conceptual-type-digression pattern. Apparently, the only possible link between the underpinning of this sequential

digression and al-Jaahiz is his penchant for Arabic poetry ranging from the pre-Islamic era to his own time. For no one has had such tremendous efforts in the account of Arabic poetry and rhetoric simultaneously, as al-Jaahiz has had in his works [Abu Musa, 2010, p. 35-36]. In addition, his natural tendency to exemplify the topic in question through a variety of poems reinforces our claim.

Now, in our quest for finding the fact, we have observed that the only suitable literary element in Arabic poetry, which is commensurate with al-Jaahiz's prodigious nature and is similar to his digression scheme, is nothing but its extensive simile; for it is a well-established fact that the pre-Islamic and early Islamic poetry, especially *المعلقات السبع* *the most celebrated 7 classic odes* and the longer poems are typically characterized by producing extensive similes that serve as a means of literary embellishment. So it's no wonder that someone who waxes lyrical about poetry and has an exceptional predilection for it will be influenced by its style in his/her writings.

To accord the aforesaid claim a more rigorous and precise quality, let us have an example from the Mullaqah of Tarafa bin 'Abd al-Bakri (d. 564 CA) [al-Zauzani, 1993, p.61-62] who, in the extract that follows, has just embarked upon depicting a typical early Arabic poetic scene in which the beloved of the poet leaves her campsite. He says:

كَأَنَّ حُدُوجَ الْمَالِكِيَّةِ عُذُوءٌ      خَالِيًا سَفِينٍ بِالنَّوَاصِفِ مِنْ دَدٍ  
عُدُولِيَّةٍ أَوْ مِنْ سَفِينِ ابْنِ يَأْمَنِ      يُجُورُ بِهِ الْمَلَّاحُ طَوْرًا وَيَهْتَدِي  
يَشُقُّ حُبَابَ الْمَاءِ حَيْزُومَهَا بِهَا      كَمَا قَسَمَ التُّرْبَ الْمُقَائِلُ بِالْيَدِ

“As if, yesterday,  
the howdas of a Milikite  
were a ship, free-floating,  
in the wide wadi beds of Didi,  
The ship of an 'Adawliyyan  
or the Yemenite,  
the mate tacking at times  
then bringing her around,  
She cleaves the rippled waves,  
bow breast submerged,  
like the hand of a child at play,  
scooping through the soft soil.  
[Sells, 1986, p. 24]

Here in this section of the ode, the poet, while picturing the departure scene of his beloved *Khawla* as she leaves her campsite, throws the focus on her howdahs and draws a comparison between them and the looming shape of sailing ships and thus leaves the main line of the plot behind. Then, having the narrative centred on the ship scene, he, by means of his poetic imagery, makes another parallel between the cleaving ships and a boy dividing soft soil at play.

And in this way, he takes the exit from the ship episode and focuses on a new scene, i.e., the playing boy which is further away from the main storyline.

Similarly, as the early Arab poets used to deviate from the theme at hand to something that is not strictly related to it through an extended simile, so too did al-Jaahiz in his writings by means of digression. And in both cases, there is a link that makes the thread of the narrative/discourse loosely connected.

## 5. Conclusion:

Al-Jaahiz was a magpie, heterogeneous and thinking colossus amongst contemporary scholars, but before that, he was predominantly a grand master of early Arabic poetry and rhetoric. So his diverse interests including his predilection for poetry have a strong influence on his writing style. As a result, his works, in general, and *Kitaab al-Bayaan wa al-Tabyeen*, in particular, epitomise his competence and expertise in different areas of knowledge by producing informative, yet digressive, discourse embellished with poetry. The aim of this adornment is to keep the discourse perpetually animated; not to fossilize it. And the book in question is, therefore, shot through with digressions. However, these digressions, as we have proved through our discussion, maintain a chain scheme where each digression is linked to and caused by another, thereby prolonging the discourse which might cause in certain cases tedium in reading. Incidentally, this style of linking digression is commensurate with his penchant for Arabic poetry; for early Arab poets generally tended to employ extensive similes which are characterized by interconnections. Whatever the ground is, digressions in al-Jaahiz's writings, especially in *al-Bayaan the book of eloquence and exposition* typify his multidisciplinary approach that not only reestablishes the fact that the author of this book is a giant among his contemporary scholars but also proves that it was written in the golden age of Arabic literature.

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