



CRITICAL VIEWS ON THE POET AḤMAD SHAWQÎ: A STUDY

¹Dr. Imran Hossain Talukdar and ²Dr. Noor Uddin Ahmed

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Arabic, Sankosh Degree Collage, Gossaigaon, Assam, India

²Associate Professor, Department of Arabic, Cotton University, Guwahati, Assam, India

Abstract:

Aḥmad Shawqî, widely acknowledged as the Prince of Poets, has been the subject of diverse critical perspectives, each shedding light on different aspects of his significant contributions to Arabic poetry. Traditionalists admire Shawqî for skilfully preserving classical Arabic forms, demonstrating linguistic purity, and maintaining allegiance to established poetic meters. Modernists commend his pioneering role in modernizing Arabic poetry, particularly through the introduction of poetic drama, showcasing a willingness to experiment with new literary genres. Nationalist critics appreciate Shawqî's poetry for its profound connection to Egyptian identity, as his verses often convey a sense of national pride and celebrate the beauty of Egypt. Shawqî's romantic poetry resonates with critics who focus on emotions, nature, and yearning, aligning him with the broader Romantic tradition in Arabic literature. Additionally, political critics recognize his role as a voice of dissent and reform, as his works often address contemporary political and social issues. Formalistic critics delve into the structure and form of Shawqî's poetry, examining his meticulous use of language, rhyme, and meter to enhance the overall aesthetic quality of his work. Comparative analysts explore Shawqî's poetry in relation to other poets, both within the Arab world and globally, assessing his unique contributions.

Keywords: Aḥmad Shawqî, prince of poets, Arabic poetry, nationalism, tradition and innovation, literary brilliance etc.

Introduction:

Aḥmad Shawqî is regarded as one of the prominent poets who played a crucial role in the revitalization of modern Arabic poetry. He is credited as the first poet to introduce poetic drama, and critics widely acknowledge Shawqî as a just compensation for a ten-century period lacking notable poets in Arab history. Following the departure of Al-Mutanabbî, no gifted poet had emerged until Shawqî, who breathed new life into poetry, ushering it into the modern era and introducing a variety of themes. He engaged in writing poetry, poetic dramas, and works for children, addressing various aspects of his time, particularly the political issues prevalent during the Khedivial era.

Aḥmad Shawqî maintained a profound loyalty to the palace of Muhammad Ali, being treated as one of its esteemed members. This close association can be attributed to his deep ties. His critical poem targeting the Egyptian leader Aḥmad Orabî is often linked to this proximity, which led him to be protective of the ruling establishment, fostering animosity towards Orabî and holding him accountable. Despite being close to the ruling elite at that time, Shawqî studied in England, and his numerous poems expressed his yearning for Egypt.

Shawqî was a poet in every sense of the word, with critics saying, "Poetry began with Ahmed and ended with Ahmed." However, this statement might be an exaggeration, as poetry is an ongoing creation as long as the language is preserved.

Shawqî was a poet of his time, closely connected to the struggles of the common people despite his elite status. He was known for his excellent recitation skills, often entrusting the task to Hafez Ibrahim, who had a



powerful and beautiful voice. Shawqî maintained the eloquence, classical language, and poetic meters, demonstrating a balance between tradition and modernity.

It is worthy of mention that the Poet Haidar Maḥmūd considers Shawqî the Prince of Poets without any dispute, stating that Shawqî had a clear impact on contemporary poetry in the 20th century. Shawqî managed to bring Arab poetry out of a period of stagnation, renewing it and addressing various aspects of his time, especially in his politically charged works.

Shawqî's importance lies in his efforts to revive Arab poetic heritage, maintaining eloquence while incorporating modern elements. He balanced tradition and modernity, creating a bridge between the past and the present. Despite being labelled a prince of the palace, Shawqî remained close to the poor and working-class people.

Shawqî's significant contribution to Arabic poetry is acknowledged by critics, as he skilfully blended traditional and modern elements, leaving a lasting impact on the poetic landscape. His ability to rejuvenate poetic heritage while embracing modernity sets him apart.

Yūsuf ‘Abd al-‘Azîz, a critic and analyst, views Aḥmad Shawqî as part of the pioneering generation that laid the foundation for contemporary Arabic poetry after a long period of stagnation. Shawqî's poetic experiment, along with the works of Ibrahim and Maḥmūd Sâmi Al-Bârûdî, formed a new base for modern texts. Interestingly, Shawqî's generation created a significant wave of modernization in poetry, comparable to the major European modernization wave, especially in France, without being heavily influenced by it.

Shawqî's generation focused on reviving Arabic poetic heritage, and he sought to associate his name with poets like Al-Buḥturî. He reintroduced traditional Arabic expressions and terms while embracing the richness of the language. Shawqî's attempt to revive poetic heritage was crucial for new poetic generations, and it went beyond a mere return to the past. His influence extended towards European modernity, aligning with the movements of Al-Sayyâb, Al-Bayyâtî, and Al-Malaika.

Khâlîd Abû Khâlîd considers Shawqî as the pivotal figure between the living poets like Maḥmūd Sâmi Al-Barûdî and the romantics like Ali Maḥmūd Taha. He emphasizes the importance of Shawqî's era in bridging the gap for romantics to pick up the thread of romantic poetry. Although the romantics labelled themselves "Apollo Poets," influenced by Western Romanticism, they remained connected to the roots of Arabic romantic poetry. Abu Khalid suggests that Shawqî filled a void in that era.

Khâlîd Muṭran, named the poet of two centuries, acknowledges Shawqî's contribution but believes that the satisfaction he received by being named the poet of two centuries did not match the magnitude of his role in innovation compared to Shawqî.¹

Description:

It appears from the history of Arabic literature that Aḥmad Shawqî thrived as an undisputed poet among all other Neo-classicist Arab poets. He was acclaimed as the Prince of Poets, and his influence on modern Arabic poetry is undeniable. His ability to balance tradition and modernity, revive poetic heritage, and introduce drama to Arabic poetry sets him apart as a poet who transcends time.



In fact, poetry is an expressive phenomenon in human life. It began, as is known, in simplicity reflective of human life. As life, in form or content, became complex, the form could no longer accommodate this new content, necessitating the search for a more expansive expressive style. Poetry has essential elements that define and distinguish it from other linguistic forms and literary genres. According to the poet Ahmad 'Abd al-Mu'ġi al-Hijāzī, there are four fundamental pillars of poetic creativity: rhythmic musicality, language, imagination (the internal energy producing illusion or anticipation with all its rhetorical derivatives), and meaning.

These poetic pillars have accompanied poetry throughout its long journey, with some variations in their arrangement based on the creative vision of each poetic school. The ancient Arab poet, while adhering to the concept of poetry as "regulated, rhymed speech expressing meaning," was influenced by linguistic deviation as much as by metrical deviation. The musicality of poetry continued to progress in the arrangement, reaching its peak in the "revival" era, particularly at the beginning of the twentieth century (neo-classicism). This was expressed by the poet Ḥafīz Ibrāhīm when he paid tribute to the Prince of Poets Aḥmad Shawqī, saying: "Poetry is meters, and if weighed, the pearl will darken in its scale."

Then came the Romantic (renewed) era, rearranging these pillars, placing imagination at the forefront according to the creative doctrine of this poetic school. Khalil Mutran expressed this when he said: "If some of this poetry has its own status, poetry, in its entirety, is pure imagination." Subsequently, the "activist" poetry stage emerged, reaching its zenith in the 1950s and 1960s in many Arab countries, especially Iraq and Egypt. It brought about a dual change, replacing the traditional rhythm, emphasizing language over other pillars.

In the modern stage, which witnessed the emergence of prose poetry, there was no modification as in previous stages, but rather a complete abandonment of "prosodic music," relying only on language and imagination. Some critics argue that this shift does not mean that prose poetry completely rejects musicality but chooses what suits it, conditioned by a strong integration with structural and semantic aspects, neither preceding nor following them.

Based on this foundation, proponents of prose poetry believe that rhythm cannot be confined to the prosodic system because it may conflict with structural and semantic construction, leading to the loosening or contraction of the text. This could result in the waste of some of its poetic and linguistic essence. While recognizing that prose poetry aims to "feel the world," it has made notable achievements at every stage of its development, ancient and modern.

However, it deviated from the traditional path, preferring to explore poetic regions in the world and incorporate them into its domain to exercise its creativity. Its concern, according to Egyptian critic Muhammad 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, is no longer to convey reality but to "examine" poetic regions in reality and engage with them. Despite this, the critic emphasizes that the objectives of poetic creativity, whether in the form of vertical poetry, activist poetry, or prose poetry, should aim to serve the essence of poetry and language.

There is a minimal number of examples of prose poetry that do exhibit poetic tension and an internal music - albeit unique - reflecting the spirit of poetry. However, the abundance of poorly executed examples labelled as strange and the excess in narrative prose and the lack of clear rhythmic and musical elements require enthusiasts of poetic creativity to adhere to strict foundations and rules governing the output of this expressive form.



It is undeniable that any poetic creativity must have anchors, whether in language, music, imagination, or meaning. The ever-renewing life imposes the need for continuous renewal in language, visions, imagery, and meanings. In my estimation, the Arab poetic scene can accommodate all forms of expression, including vertical poetry, activist poetry, and prose poetry. Although there may be a conflict between these poetic forms, it is hoped that this conflict will be positive rather than exclusionary.

Attempts to exclude classical poetry (vertical) and free verse (activist) have failed and continue despite the intensity of disagreements among their advocates in earlier periods. It is clear that the accelerating pace of life and the rapid developments and stormy changes in our current world make it challenging for most people to indulge excessively in imagination to predict their outcomes. Therefore, continuously unfolding modern conditions will inevitably produce contemporary situations that will reflect positively or negatively on artistic tastes, whether in poetry or prose, and the days are pregnant with everything new.²

It has been observed that according to some critics, Ahmad Shawqî's poetic talents began to shine while he was a law student. During his time in France, he consistently sent poems praising Khedive Tawfiq. After returning to Egypt, he became the "Poet of the Palace," close to Khedive 'Abbâs Hilmî.

The poet Aḥmad Shawqî had a strong connection to the Ottoman Caliphate, as Egypt was a part of it. He extensively praised its Sultan Abdul Hamid II, urging Muslims to pay attention to it.

In fact, some critics believe that his support for the Khedive stemmed from several reasons. Firstly, the Khedive was his benefactor, and the poet Aḥmad Shawqî was under his patronage. Secondly, there was a religious motivation as poets felt obligated to defend the Ottoman Caliphate, seen as an Islamic caliphate.

We are aware of the fact that the poet Aḥmad Shawqî criticized the British occupation of Egypt, leading to his exile to Spain in 1914. In exile, he explored Arabic literature and facets of Islamic civilization in Andalusia, composing many poems in admiration. He longed for his homeland, Egypt, and returned after spending four years in exile.³

Concerning the credits of Aḥmad Shawqî's poetry, Dr. Taha Husayn says as follows: "We do not read from the poet except his poems and from the writer except his texts, but behind the texts, there is a whole world of important secrets in understanding the way the text is formed and its quality or lack thereof. On the other hand, most authors, especially poets, reject criticism and revere praise. *Amîr al-Shu'arâ* Aḥmad Shawqî is no exception to this; he used to reject his critics with twisted methods, but he did not openly antagonize them, while the opinion of the dean of Arabic literature, Taha Ḥusayn, represents an important point in understanding some of the intricacies of the poet.

One of Taha Ḥusayn's criticisms of *Amîr al-Shu'arâ* Aḥmad Shawqî is that he did not read as he should. He believes that Shawqî, initially a cultured person who loved and appreciated knowledge, followed the path of many Egyptian youth who pursued education without proper guidance, especially when studying in Europe.

In addition, Dr. Taha Ḥusayn also asserts that Aḥmad Shawqî did not have a clear artistic creed in poetry, nor did he attempt to form one for himself. He did not think about poetry except when he spoke it. According to Husayn, Shawqî is a renewed poet at times, an imitator at others, and his renewal and imitation do not stem from a clear artistic creed but rather are influenced by the moment he prepares to utter poetry and the circumstances under which he borrows poetry.



Criticism of the poet:

Taha Ḥusayn advises others to praise Shawqī without reservation, but he, on the other hand, does not want to praise or criticize excessively. He prefers objective criticism over excessive praise, and he believes that Shawqī benefits more from fair criticism than from excessive praise. Hussein thinks that he has praised and admired Shawqī enough, and now it is time for constructive criticism rather than relentless praise.

He adds that he is confident that he won't anger Shawqī if he criticizes him, and he might even anger him if he exaggerates in praising him. Shawqī is a poet who loves poetry for the sake of poetry. He expresses emotions he wants to convey and feelings he wants to share. According to Hussein, he is a poet because he feels, not because he wants to speak, no more and no less.

The dean of Arabic literature Taha Ḥusayn considers Shawqī's personality as dual. He is a believer and, at the same time, a lover of life and its pleasures. He attempts to explain this duality, stating that Shawqī, after returning from exile in Spain (1915-1920), underwent a serious transformation. He broke free from the constraints of politics in his traditional poetry and started expressing the sentiments and inclinations of the people around him. Moreover, he suddenly discovered himself and, as a poet created for renewal, he ventured into a new form of art in Arabic literature, the art of poetic representation.

Taha Hussein acknowledges that he was influenced by Hafez in his admiration for Shawqī. Hafez reserved a special place for the poet of the Nile in his affection and love, something *Amīr al-Shu'arā'* did not enjoy. According to Hussein, Hafez's spirit and the horizon of his soul coincided with Shawqī's, and many of Ḥāfiẓ's moral qualities aligned with Shawqī's.

Regarding Shawqī's nature, Taha Husayn believes it was complex, influenced by Arab, Turkish, Greek, and Circassian elements. All these influences converged, forming Shawqī's character, which, due to this complexity, was far from simplicity and naivety. Shawqī's rich and fertile soul, with its intricate and composite nature, made him rich and wealthy. Additionally, a new element, the French influence, worked in his mind, imagination, and mood.

Shawqī lived among Arabs in their poetry and literature, magnifying his share of the Arabic language. He associated with Turks in his daily life, forming a strong connection with them, and this Turkish element became significant in him. Unfortunately, modern literature did not allow Shawqī to interact with the ancient Greeks as much as he would have liked.

In fact, Taha Hussein expresses a desire to forget baseless animosities and focus only on the good that invites love and stirs feelings of sorrow and pain. He emphasizes the importance of genuine, sincere supplication and avoids harbouring enemies or seeking reconciliation.

He insists that if Shawqī had read the Iliad and the Odyssey in their entirety and understood them, he would have granted himself the freedom to create poetry that combines Arabic language with a new form, the art of poetic representation. Despite any previous disagreements, Taha Husayn expresses a commitment to let go of negativity and focus on constructive criticism and genuine supplication for the beloved poet, *Amīr al-Shu'arā'* Aḥmad Shawqī." ⁴

Haidar Maḥmūd, the poet, considered Shawqī as the prince of poets without any dispute. He states that Aḥmad Shawqī is undoubtedly a great poet, leaving a clear mark on contemporary poetry in the 20th century.



Shawqî played a pivotal role in advancing Arabic poetic movement beyond the stagnation of the Ottoman era, even before poets of his time pledged allegiance to him as the leader of poetry. He renewed Arabic poetry, delving into modern themes and diversifying poetic subjects. Shawqî contributed to various genres, including poetry, poetic drama, and children's literature, addressing issues of his time, especially those critical of the political reality during the Khedivial era.

Despite his association with the royal court at the time, Shawqî went to study in France, showcasing his longing for Egypt in poems such as "Al-Siniyah." Shawqî was a true poet in every sense of the word, with critics stating that "poetry began with Ahmed and ended with Ahmed." However, some consider this statement an exaggeration, as poetry is an ever-evolving art, and the birth of new poets is inevitable as long as the Arabic language is preserved.

Shawqî remained connected to the concerns of the people, even as a figure in the palace. Despite his affluent lifestyle compared to other poets, he maintained proximity to the poor and toiling masses. Known for his lack of proficiency in reciting poetry, Shawqî entrusted this task to Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm, known for his powerful and beautiful voice. Shawqî, however, preserved the eloquence, classical vocabulary, and poetic meters, staying true to the traditions upheld by Khalīl Ibn Aḥmad.

Although Shawqî's poetry displayed modern elements, it did not deviate from the classical eloquence. Shawqî's importance lies in his attempt to revive Arabic poetic heritage. Despite his appreciation for French literature, Shawqî's generation, unlike others, was minimally influenced by the European poetic modernity.

Notable achievements include surpassing other poets in poetic confrontations, such as his triumph over Qairuwānî with "*Yâ Layla al-Ṣabāḥ Matâ Ghadan*," his victory over Imâm al-Busirî through "*Nahj al-Burda*," and his renowned poem "*Al-Siniyah*," which outshone Buḥtarî. Aḥmed Shawqî, the prince of poets, remains unmatched, much like his grandfather, al-Mutanabbî, the eternal prince of poets.

It is worth mentioning that Shawqî's era marked a significant period between the living poets like Maḥmûd Sâmi al-Bârûdî and the romantics like 'Alî Maḥmûd Taha. This phase, represented by Shawqî, was crucial in connecting the traditional Arab poetic heritage with the emerging modern poetry. The significance of Shawqî's role lies in his dedication to reviving the Arab poetic heritage, not merely a return to the past but a natural extension of modernity, similar to what Al-Mutanabbî accomplished.

Shawqî's influence was not confined to Egypt, evident from the statue erected in the Garden of the Greats in Rome alongside many world poets. His global recognition signifies that Shawqî introduced the Arab nation to the world, not merely claiming a global status for himself.

Shawqî celebrated his homeland, nation, nature, and love, excelling in encapsulating enduring meaning. His poems, especially those sung by 'Abd al-Wahab, are still memorized, proving their timeless significance. Shawqî introduced poetic drama to Arab literature, and his contribution created a new dimension, a poetic theatre.

Khalīl Muṭran's designation of Shawqî as the poet of two centuries may not have fully satisfied him, as he constantly sought renewal more than Shawqî did. Shawqî's legacy remains, and he stands as a high literary figure in our creative history, a poet who did not fade away.⁵

In the contemplation of Aḥmad Shawqî's verses, exemplified in works like "*On the Slopes of Aḥdam*" and "*Abū al-Sahūl*," one experiences a profound sense of awe and grandeur, elevating the reader to celestial heights.



Shawqî bestows upon the reader a depth of meaning that the soul ardently craves, vividly capturing every heartbeat. His poem "*Nahj Al-Burda*," dedicated to the celebration of Prophet Muhammad's birthday, reveals a palpable Islamic sentiment, with faith permeating his poetry. Notably, he deviates from this theme in expressing strong support for the Turks and the Ottoman Caliphate.

Shawqî's verses extend their embrace to the Arabs, extolling their glory and message in three poems, while he dedicates eighteen poems to the Caliphate and the Turks. This inclination stems from his profound admiration for Turkish rule, a sentiment he attributes to the Turkish blood coursing through his veins.

Critiquing poetry lacking depth, Shawqî draws a poignant parallel, likening it to the primitive age of animals. His renown in Arabic literature is further enhanced by his poetic plays, a craft he honed during a sojourn in France while pursuing his studies. Among his noteworthy plays are "*Ali Pasha Al-Kabîr*," "*The Death of Cleopatra*," "*Majnûn Layla*," "*Qambîz*," and "*Antarah*." ⁶

Aḥmad Shawqî is widely acknowledged as a prominent figure of the Adopted School, and his poetry distinctly reflects the characteristics and elements of classicism. These attributes are evident in both the meaning and style of his work. The poetic meanings, constituting the substance derived from the objective world, are a key aspect of his expression. According to Muhammad Al-Kattanî, "In Shawqî's poetry, it serves as an expression of a perspective on the universe, transcending the various appearances the universe presents to the poet, be it nature, an event, a social phenomenon, or a personal experience. This perspective represents an endeavour to comprehend the universe. The poet delves into the sought truth only to the extent of possessing keen insight, transparent feelings, and delicate sensations. Consequently, Shawqî's poetry becomes a celebration of wisdom". ⁷

Discussion:

Aḥmad Shawqî is considered one of the founders of the School of Revival and Renaissance in poetry, along with Mahmûd Sâmi Al-Bârûdî, Hâfîz Ibrahim, 'Ali Al-Jarîm, and Aḥmad Maḥram. The poets of this school adhered to the traditional forms of Arabic poetry, following the path of the ancients, especially during the period extending from the *Jahiliyyah* era to the Abbasid period. However, this commitment was blended with innovations in poetic purposes, which were not known to the ancients, such as theatrical narratives, national poetry, and social poetry. Shawqî composed poetry for various purposes, including praise, elegy, love, description, and wisdom.

Writers and poets pledged allegiance to Aḥmad Shawqî as their prince in a ceremony held in Cairo in 1927. He remained a source of admiration and appreciation not only among the intellectual and literary circles but also among the general public. In 1932, Shawqî departed from our world, and his noble soul returned to its Creator at the age of sixty-four. ⁸

Aḥmad Shawqî, known for his abundant intelligence, preferred conversing with close friends rather than engaging in large crowds. This inclination may have arisen from the mismatch between his spoken words and the eloquence of his writing, and he valued solitude in cafés or fields to avoid public gatherings. He rarely lost his temper and showed great compassion, avoiding discussions or sights of tragedies. In his daily life, Shawqî accepted hardships, teaching himself to embrace fate. When faced with adversity, he sought solace by extracting positive aspects from challenges, recognizing that everything was ultimately guided by the will of Allah. ⁹

Aḥmad Shawqî started his learning journey with the study of "*Al-Wasîla Al-Adabiya*" by Al-Marsafî and the poems of the ancients, notably Al-Bârûdî. In fact, Shawqî extended his exploration to the anthologies of his



predecessors, extracting inspiration and incorporating their excellence into his own works. His proficiency in the authentic Arabic style was evident in various poems. Furthermore, Shawqî's linguistic prowess extended beyond Arabic to Turkish, where he skilfully integrated verses into his collections. His command of the French language was remarkable, influenced by literary giants such as de Musset, Lamartine, and Victor Hugo. These influences manifested diversely in his romantic poetry, with Victor Hugo's historical poetry inspiring Shawqî during his early years.

Shawqî's engagement with French literature went beyond poetry. He explored dramatic literature, particularly the works of de Musset and Lafontaine. This exposure likely prompted him, during his government employment, to compose three prose stories: "*Adhrâ' al-Hind*" (Virgin of India), "*Ladiyâs*," and "*Riqat al-As*." These stories showcased his ability to distil life's lessons and incorporate moral aphorisms into his poetic expressions.

It must be admitted that Aḥmad Shawqî's intellectual journey encompassed a profound exploration of Arabic, Turkish, and French literature. His adeptness in language and diverse influences enriched his poetry, showcasing a unique blend of traditional Arabic forms with modern and international elements.¹⁰

Conclusion:

Aḥmad Shawqî emerges as a literary polymath, deeply immersed in the exploration of Arabic, Turkish, and French literature. His commitment to mastering language and drawing inspiration from a diverse array of poetic traditions is evident throughout his body of work. From his early engagement with classic Arabic texts to his incorporation of Turkish verses and his nuanced understanding of French literature, Shawqî's intellectual journey reflects a unique fusion of tradition and modernity.

His proficiency in expressing profound meanings in poetry, his exploration of different literary forms, and his ability to derive lessons from various cultural sources demonstrate Shawqî's versatility. Whether delving into the historical poetry of Victor Hugo, adopting the narrative style of Lamartine, or experimenting with prose stories influenced by de Musset and Lafontaine, Shawqî's literary endeavours reveal a poet who transcended linguistic boundaries to create a rich and multifaceted body of work. In essence, Shawqî's legacy lies not only in his contributions to Arabic poetry but also in his ability to harmoniously integrate diverse literary influences, showcasing the universality of his artistic vision.

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