

**Kitâb al-Bukhalâ': A Literary Masterpiece by
 Al-Jâhiz in Classical Arabic Prose**

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Abstract

The literary masterpiece book *Kitâb al-Bukhalâ'* is a significant literary work authored by al-Jâhiz. In the introduction, al-Jâhiz notes that he wrote the book for a close friend who was particularly captivated by his writings. The text revolves around the theme of misers, with a specific focus on individuals from the city of Marw in Khorasan. Through various anecdotes and stories, al-Jâhiz shares encounters with misers, particularly from his circle in Marw. His depiction of these characters and scenarios is both entertaining and thought-provoking, blending humour with an insightful critique of social behaviours. Al-Jâhiz's artistic approach uses comic situations to prompt reflection on societal realities, making the characters relatable and rooted in real-life experiences. This paper explores how *Kitâb al-Bukhalâ'* reveals the human nature of miserly individuals within the broader context of Arabic literature.

Keywords: 1. Kitâb al-Bukhalâ', al-Jâhiz, Misers, Arabic literature, social critique, etc.

Introduction:

Kitâb al-Bukhalâ' is one of al-Jâhiz's most significant works, known for its light-hearted and refreshing tone. Blending literary and scientific comedy, the book offers a vivid portrayal of social life during the Abbasid era, exploring the dynamics of households and the intersection of personal and public affairs.

In the introduction, al-Jâhiz hints that the book was written for a prominent figure of the time, possibly Ibn Al-Mudabber, Al-Fath bin Khaqan, or Muhammad bin 'Abd al-Malik al-Zayyât, all of whom were close to al-Jâhiz. His recounting of misers is filled with humour, reflecting his ability to blend comedy and seriousness. Al-Jâhiz's narrative is clear and composed, with carefully selected anecdotes that depict the psychological quirks and behaviours of misers.

Rather than fostering negative feelings towards misers, al-Jâhiz evokes empathy, presenting their actions in a way that encourages understanding. The book also mirrors the Abbasid era, offering critiques of certain societal traits while acknowledging the benefits of frugality, particularly in economic matters.¹

Al-Jâhiz as a Litterateur:

Abû 'Uthmân 'Amr ibn Bahr al-Jâhiz (780-869 A.D.) was born in Basra, a hub of knowledge and literature. He studied under prominent scholars, including the Mu'tazilite thinker Abû Ishâq al-Nizâm, and became a key contributor to the Mu'tazilite doctrine. Al-Jâhiz's insatiable love for learning led him to amass and study numerous books, exploring a wide range of subjects and establishing new literary genres.

His career spanned Basra and Baghdad, where he gained the favour of rulers and authored many influential works. Despite his eccentricities and humorous nature, he was known for his compassion and intellectual rigor. His writings introduced a fresh, straightforward style to Arabic literature, avoiding excessive metaphor. Al-Jâhiz's profound knowledge and contributions positioned him among the greatest Arab scholars, comparable to Voltaire and Nâbigha.²

Al-Jâhiz's reputation as a master of prose literature far exceeds his contributions to poetry. While his poetic works generally followed traditional norms, lacking significant innovation or creativity, his

impact on prose writing was transformative. He is credited with having authored around 200 books, leaving a lasting influence on Arabic literature. As Professor Ibn al-'Amîd aptly observed, "The intellect of al-Jâhiz should be held in the highest regard, followed by his literary works."

Unfortunately, only a small portion of al-Jâhiz's extensive body of work has been published. Among his most prominent contributions is "Kitâb al-Bayân wa al-Tabyîn", which explores literature, rhetoric, and oratory. This book has played a key role in shaping the study of Arabic prose and communication. Another significant work is "Kitâb al-Hayawân", a comprehensive text on zoological science, which showcases al-Jâhiz's knowledge of the natural world. Other notable works include "Kitâb al-Muhâsin wa al-Aḍḍâd", a study of literary contrasts, *Kitâb al-Bukhalâ'*, which humorously examines the lives of misers, and "Dîwân Rasâ'ilihî", an anthology of his various treatises. These writings exemplify his wide-ranging intellectual pursuits and literary achievements.³

In his old age, al-Jâhiz's health declined, and he suffered from hemiplegia, as noted by al-Mubarrad. When asked about his condition, al-Jâhiz humorously remarked, "One half of me is so paralyzed that I wouldn't feel it if cut with saws, while the other half is so sensitive that a fly's touch causes excruciating pain. I've experienced this for ninety-six years." Despite his illness, it wasn't the direct cause of his death. According to legend, he died when part of his vast library collapsed, burying him under the books in 868 AD, at around ninety-six years old.⁴

Ahmed bin Yazid bin Muhammad Al-Muhallabi shared a story from his father, noting that when news of al-Jâhiz's death reached al-Mu'tazz Billah, he offered his condolences, saying, "May there be long life and continuous blessings." This event occurred in the year 255 of the Islamic calendar.

Al-Jâhiz passed away, leaving behind a vast intellectual and scientific legacy. His contributions spanned numerous fields, including theology, history, literature, language, humour, politics, philosophy, religion, ethics, botany, zoology, industry, and women's issues. Despite his modest appearance—marked by large eyes, a dark complexion, and short stature—he had a strong physical presence and was known for his energetic nature.⁵

Al-Jâhiz was a true polymath and a central figure in his intellectual community. His scientific contributions are still admired and studied today. His literary works, full of wit and humour, remain a source of inspiration. It's rare to find a writer, critic, humourist, or scholar who doesn't reference Al-Jâhiz. His works are a vast repository of knowledge, frequently quoted and discussed.

The lasting proof of his brilliance, authenticity, and influence is that his name continues to resonate through time, much like the endless cycle of day and night.⁶

Kitâb al-Bukhalâ': An Introduction

Al-Jâhiz's *Kitâb al-Bukhalâ'* is an exceptional collection of stories focused on greedy individuals, offering a unique perspective on the social landscape of his time. He was a remarkably prolific writer among his contemporaries, known for his distinctive prose that combines humour and satire.

In this notable work, al-Jâhiz keenly examines human psychology, mocking various characters like schoolmasters, beggars, singers, and scribes, all embodying greedy traits. The anecdotes from *Kitâb al-Bukhalâ'* continue to circulate in magazines throughout the Arabic-speaking world. This book is considered one of al-Jâhiz's greatest accomplishments and remains an important part of children's literature in contemporary Arab culture.⁷

Al-Jāhiz was a distinctive writer known for his unique literary style, which prominently featured humour and satire to tackle social issues. His famous work, *Kitāb al-Bukhalā'*, exemplifies this approach, showcasing sarcastic retorts that effectively silence his adversaries. He used humour not just for amusement but also to illuminate the human experience, helping his readers cope with life's challenges.

Moreover, al-Jāhiz skilfully incorporated digression in his writing, which kept his work engaging and avoided monotony. He critiqued various elements of society with wit and often employed an elegant tone in his introductions.⁸

***Kitāb al-Bukhalā'*: Its Literary Style**

Kitāb al-Bukhalā' is a literary work that has gained significant recognition despite its relatively short length. It is distinguished by several artistic styles and approaches:

1. Realistic and Humorous Approach: Al-Jāhiz employs a realistic and humorous tone, connecting with readers through language that resonates with everyday people.
2. Departure from Prevailing Style: He diverges from the strict and serious tone typical of his era, opting for a lighter and more accessible style.
3. Minimal Elaboration on Meanings: Al-Jāhiz avoids excessive elaboration on meanings, only drawing upon others' words for clarification when necessary.
4. Explanation of Terms: He explains various terms in the text, such as "the punch", "the sector, and "the ink", to ensure reader comprehension.
5. Artistic Imagery: The use of vivid artistic images throughout the work adds depth and richness to his descriptions.
6. Vivid Portrayal of Misers: Al-Jāhiz offers a humorous and detailed portrayal of misers, exploring their psychology and depicting their movements, expressions, and secrets. He keenly observes their behaviour at home, their speech, and other facets of their lives.

Overall, *Kitāb al-Bukhalā'* is a literary gem, celebrated for its realistic and humorous approach, its departure from the seriousness of its time, effective imagery, clear explanations, and vivid depictions of misers.⁹

Kitāb al-Bukhalā' is a masterpiece of Al-Jāhiz, showcasing a vivid portrayal of misers he observed, particularly in Marv, the capital of Khorasan. This work offers a realistic and humorous exploration of their actions, anxious expressions, and the secrets hidden within their homes. Al-Jāhiz delves into their conversations, providing insights into their personalities and the contexts that shaped them.

The book serves as a multifaceted study of society, education, psychology, and economics, focusing on this unique group. It is an invaluable archival resource for future generations, rich in material for educational and creative pursuits. Regarded as Al-Jāhiz's magnum opus, it gathers narratives about miserliness, especially regarding frugality in food consumption.

While rooted, the identities of some individuals are discreetly veiled. Al-Jāhiz depicts individuals who prioritize thriftiness over indulgence, often enduring hardships to accumulate wealth. The work also highlights the frugal lifestyle of the Abbasid era and addresses how some individuals transformed from poverty to sudden wealth due to trade expansion and economic changes during this period.¹⁰

The Contents of *Kitâb al-Bukhalâ'*:

Kitâb al-Bukhalâ' is rich with a multitude of narratives, each offering a unique glimpse into the lives of misers and the themes surrounding avarice. Below, we highlight some of the notable stories and writings featured in this significant work:

1. Risâlah Sahl b. Hârûn: A letter that provides insight into the character of Sahl and his perspectives on frugality.
2. Qiṣṣa Ahl al-Baṣra min al-Musajjidiyîn: This tale explores the behaviours and attitudes of the people of Basra, particularly those associated with the mosque, highlighting their relationship with wealth and thrift.
3. Qiṣṣa Zubaida b. Hamîd: A story that delves into the life of Zubaida, shedding light on her habits and the cultural norms regarding wealth.
4. Qiṣṣa Layla al-Nâ'itiyya: This narrative focuses on Layla, portraying her unique approach to life and her interactions with others regarding wealth.
5. Qiṣṣa Ahmad b. Khalf: A tale about Ahmad, offering insights into his character and how he exemplifies the traits of a miser.
6. Hadith Khâlid b. Yazîd: This account features the sayings of Khâlid, providing a moral perspective on miserliness and its implications.
7. Qiṣṣa Abî Ja'far: A story about Abî Ja'far that explores his views on money and generosity.
8. Qiṣṣa al-Hazâmî: This narrative focuses on the life of al-Hazâmî, revealing the intricate dynamics of his frugal lifestyle.
9. Qiṣṣa al-Hârithî: A tale that examines the behaviour of al-Hârithî, highlighting the consequences of his miserly tendencies.
10. Tafsîr Kalam Fâtik: This work provides an interpretation of Fâtik's words, offering deeper insights into the nature of greed.
11. Qiṣṣa al-Kindî: A story about the Kindî, illustrating the complexities of their relationship with wealth.
12. Qiṣṣa Muhammad b. Abi al-Mu'mal: This narrative follows Muhammad and his frugal habits, shedding light on his character.
13. Qiṣṣa Asad b. Jânî: A tale centred on Asad, revealing his attitudes towards wealth and resources.
14. Qiṣṣa Tamâm b. Ja'far: This story explores the life of Tamâm, illustrating the extremes of his frugality.
15. Qiṣṣa Ibn al-'Aqadî: A narrative focused on Ibn al-'Aqadî, detailing his experiences and views on miserliness.
16. Qiṣṣa al-Asma'î: This tale presents al-Asma'î and his distinct approach to wealth and spending.
17. Risâlah Abî al-'Âs b. 'Abd al-Wahhâb b. 'Abd al-Majîd al-Thaqafî ila al-Thaqafî: A letter that offers profound reflections on the culture of thriftiness, written by Abî al-'Âs.
18. Through these stories, Al-Jâhîz masterfully weaves a rich tapestry of human behaviour, societal norms, and the psychological intricacies of miserliness, providing readers with both entertainment and thoughtful reflection on the nature of wealth and its impact on life.¹¹

Central Idea of the book *Kitâb al-Bukhalâ'*:

In the preface of *Kitâb al-Bukhalâ'*, al-Jâhîz noted that he dedicated this literary piece to a significant figure in the state, though he refrained from naming them directly. It is widely believed that the recipient could have been either Ibn Al-Mudabir, a close associate of al-Jâhîz, or al-Fath bin Khaqan, a devoted admirer of his work who consistently encouraged his literary endeavours. Another possible dedicatee is Muhammad bin Abdul Malik Al-Zayyât, with whom al-Jâhîz had a strong rapport.

The core theme of *Kitâb al-Bukhalâ'* revolves around the misers of Merv in Khorasan, which serves as the foundation for the narratives woven throughout this book. Readers are introduced to the

various stories and dialogues featuring misers that al-Jâhiz encountered during his lifetime, all framed within his personal experiences. The book is filled with amusing anecdotes and humorous situations that not only entertain but also critique the social realities of the time. Al-Jâhiz's distinctive artistic style breathes life into these tales, establishing a vivid and sensory connection with the depicted realities.

His depiction of miserly characters is marked by detailed descriptions of their behavior, including their expressions of joy and sorrow, and their reactions to fear and anxiety. Al-Jâhiz skillfully explores their inner lives, much like an artist painting a complex portrait, revealing the secrets and nuances hidden within their households and the conversations they engage in. Rather than inciting disdain for these stingy figures, al-Jâhiz's storytelling fosters empathy and a deeper understanding of their motivations.

The narratives about misers presented by al-Jâhiz are rich with humour and sharp wit, reflecting his personality. He adeptly blends light-heartedness with seriousness, resulting in a cohesive and impactful narrative. *Kitâb al-Bukhalâ'*, penned by the polymath al-Jâhiz, is celebrated as one of the finest examples of satirical literature worldwide. The work radiates a sense of humour that infuses the entire narrative while remaining true to al-Jâhiz's unique style marked by clarity and precision. Ultimately, *Kitâb al-Bukhalâ'* stands out as a remarkable literary achievement, providing valuable insights into the social life of the Abbasid era and revealing the complexities of that time.¹²

Discussion:

The Book of Misers (*Kitâb al-Bukhalâ'*) is often regarded as the crown jewel of al-Jâhiz's literary achievements. This notable work was first published in 1900 by the scholar Van Vleuten in Leiden, marking a pivotal moment in the dissemination of al-Jâhiz's writings. The distinguished orientalist Theodor Noldeke (d. 1930) praised the book, calling for its translation into European languages to reach a wider audience.

It is widely accepted that *Kitâb al-Bukhalâ'* ranks among the four most significant texts in Arab cultural history, according to ancient critics. Al-Jâhiz's works are celebrated for their ability to entertain and educate. For instance, Ibn Duraid (d. 933 A.D.), author of "Jamharah al-Lughah", once mentioned "Parks of Hearts", a work by al-Jâhiz filled with anecdotes and poetry, highlighting the extensive influence and appeal of al-Jâhiz's literary contributions.¹³

The content of *Kitâb al-Bukhalâ'* can be categorized into two main factions, although some overlap exists. The first faction includes letters, commands, and extensive responses that form the theoretical foundation of miserliness. These writings delve into the principles and ideologies surrounding parsimony. Conversely, the second faction consists of short stories and anecdotes that illustrate the daily lives of misers. These narratives serve as practical examples of the theories outlined in the letters, showcasing how the principles of miserliness are applied in real life.¹⁴

Al-Jahiz includes a letter from Sahl ibn Harun addressed to his cousins in the Rahyoun family, who had criticized his views on miserliness. In the letter, Sahl expresses his hopes for their well-being, saying, "May God set your affairs straight for you, reunite you, and teach you goodness."

Al-Ahnaf ibn Qays advises the Banu Tamim not to rush into conflict, noting that those who charge into battle are often the quickest to retreat. A common saying among them is, "To identify many faults, examine a perceived flaw, for it is deemed flawed only because of the fault it bears. The real issue lies in criticizing what is not truly flawed."¹⁵

In this context, Ahmed bin Muhammad bin Embirick states, "I'm not sure if the value of the Book of Misers lies in its eloquence, depth of interpretation, or its unmatched precision in depiction, as it vividly reflects life in Basra and Baghdad during Al-Jahiz's time." Charles Ball further notes, "One would find it difficult to find a comparable work to The Book of Misers in Arabic literature."¹⁶

Georg Lukács once referenced Heinrich Heine, who noted, "I am struck by how people seek their history through artists rather than historians." This idea is exemplified in the works of Al-Jahiz, whose writings are marked by artistic precision, as well as in the hadiths of Ibn Duraid and the maqamat of Badi' al-Zaman, such as maqamat al-Mudayriyah and maqamat al-Basriyya. These maqamat feature characters that reflect real life, portrayed through vivid narratives.

Al-Jahiz's artistic approach went beyond simply illustrating misers across different regions like Iraq and Khorasan. He explored the nuances of their characters in detail, with a significant focus on themes of food and consumption in his Book of Misers. One notable anecdote involves Abu Nuwas, who, while traveling to Baghdad, explained why he preferred dining alone: "My solitude is not the problem; the real issue is the company. Dining with others is just pretense while eating alone captures the essence of the act."¹⁷

Al-Jahiz recounts an incident where a friend visited the home of a certain individual. Upon arrival, he found the table set, but the guests had already eaten and were praying. As he reached for food, the host warned him, saying, "Prepare a plate for the injured, but do not touch what's meant for the healthy," and instructed him to look for the chicken that had died. My friend found a piece with the thigh missing, as the untouched portions were off-limits, along with the loaves that had been nibbled or soaked in broth.

In another anecdote, this same friend described a dining experience with the host's father, who repeatedly tried to join them at the table but faced delays due to disagreements. As they began eating, the young boy expressed his annoyance, saying, "How much longer will you eat? May God withhold sustenance from your stomachs!" His grandfather, who was present, responded, "My dear son, I swear by the Lord of the Kaaba!"¹⁸

Al-Jahiz expanded his depiction of miserly individuals beyond Arab society to include characters from Khorasan, particularly those from Merv. He shared an amusing anecdote about Al-Marwazi, who had a unique way of hosting guests. When a guest arrived, he would ask, "Did you have lunch today?" If the guest answered yes, Al-Marwazi would say, "Had you not eaten, I would have offered you a lavish meal." Conversely, if the guest had not eaten, Al-Marwazi would reply, "If I had eaten, I would have provided you with five cups, ensuring that neither scarcity nor excess disrupted the balance in your hands."¹⁹

In Al-Jahiz's artistic prose, there is a notable absence of artificiality; he avoids forced assonance, using simple language that resonates with the everyday speech of the people. This simplicity allows for a linguistic framework that aligns with the daily events he depicts. His prose features well-defined elements such as events, characters, dialogues, familiar settings, and clear timelines, like techniques used in modern storytelling. Al-Jahiz, alongside contemporaries like Al-Hamdhani and Ibn Duraid, played a key role in adopting artistic prose that paved the way for genres like the maqamat.

One notable anecdote highlights the frugality of some Khorasani misers. Al-Jahiz recounts that a group of them gathered in a house, relying on a lamp for light. When their patience wore thin, they sighed and left, each sharing the lamp's oil cost, except for one man who refused to contribute. When

the lamp was lit, they covered his eyes with a handkerchief until they fell asleep, and the lamp extinguished itself. This story effectively illustrates the extent of miserliness in everyday life, a recurring theme in Al-Jahiz's work.²⁰

Al-Jahiz eloquently stated that "men are manifestations of knowledge, embodied as pens and virtuous instructors, conveying countless treasures." He emphasized the power of deduction and scrutiny, which revealed beneficial truths for humanity and created a legacy. Time has attested to Al-Jahiz's significant impact, marking his contributions with distinction.²¹

Kitab al-Bukhalâ' is scientifically significant as it provides deep insights into human psychology and behaviour. Its pages feature a wide array of names, from well-known figures to obscure individuals, along with detailed accounts of various regions, and their inhabitants, and a wealth of poetry, hadiths, and historical information. This work serves as an interdisciplinary encyclopaedia, covering diverse scientific, literary, social, geographical, and historical aspects.

Conclusion:

Al-Jâhiz's *Kitab al-Bukhalâ'* offers an engaging exploration of misers set against the backdrop of the city of Marv in Khorasan. The book intertwines anecdotes and teachings that critique social realities, showcasing Al-Jâhiz's unique style, which blends humour and seriousness. Through vivid portrayals of miserly characters, he evokes empathy while avoiding negative sentiments. His clear and concise writing makes *Kitab al-Bukhalâ'* a delightful read that reflects his personality and literary skill.

Al-Jâhiz's approach draws from various sources, primarily the linguistic traditions of pre-Islamic Arabia and the Islamic era, as well as the translated literature and philosophies of Persians, Greeks, and Indians, which have enriched Arabic culture.

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