

VAKHTANG TEVDORADZE

AKAKI TSERETELI STATE UNIVERSITY

Vakhtang.tevdoradze@atsu.edu.ge

## AL-DJĀḤIẒ'S "THE BOOK OF ANIMALS"

**Abstract**

Al-Djāḥiẓ (born c. 776, Basra – died c. 868/869, Basra) was a theologian, writer, and scholar notable for his individual and masterful Arabic prose. During the reign of Caliph al-Ma'mūn, he moved to Baghdad, where he started his career. Due to his insight, cheerful character, education, and pro-Arab sympathies, the writer became widely accepted in the Caliphate. He has created almost 200 works that concern different fields: philosophy, theology, history, geography, chemistry, etc. All the works are mainly controversial. The writer used experiments and observations to find real and logical solutions to everything. He used to avoid mysticism. He is considered to be a theoretician of Arabic literature. He created the work entitled *The Book of Eloquence and Clarifications* (*Kitāb al-Bayān wa al-Tabyīn*), in which he discusses the literary style of medieval Arabic literature, linguistic principles, Arabic eloquence, etc. The list of works by al-Djāḥiẓ that reached the present period includes the *Epistle on Education and Rounding* (*Risālat al-Tarbī' wa al-Tadwīr*). Some Arab critics assume that this work represents the beginning stage of the *maqāma* genre. From the literary viewpoint, *The Book of Misers* (*Kitāb al-Bukhālā'*) and *The Book of Animals* (*Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*) are interesting as they belong to an early period of the 'Adab genre. They represent the collection of poems, stories, and sayings about animals, excerpts from stories written by Arab, Greek, and Persian writers, phrases from the Qur'an, Bible statements, etc.

*The Book of Animals* (*Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*) consists of seven parts. It describes the animals' natural characteristics and contains aphoristic sayings (*Ḥikma*), didactics ('Adab), and humorous elements. The author uses excerpts from his contemporary literary and scientific works concerning the issue of the connection between human and animal nature, together with popular poems, sayings, and aphorisms. Al-Djāḥiẓ emphasizes that he has written this book in order to talk about those characteristics of animals that prove the wisdom and omnipotence of Allah. While studying *The Book of Animals*, its historic value attracts our attention. Here, we find diverse information about the Arab and other people's history, culture, customs, beliefs, and social relationships. All these prove the author's erudition.

**Keywords:** The Book of Animals, 'Adab, al-Djāḥiẓ, Mu'tazilite, *Ḥikma*.

Al-Djāḥiẓ (775-868) was one of the distinguished representatives of the literary movement known as "Returning to the Past". He is considered to be the leading prose writer and critic. His full name is Abū 'Uthmān 'Amr ibn Baḥr al-Djāḥiẓ, nicknamed al-Djāḥiẓ ('the bug-eyed'). He was born in Basra. Young al-Djāḥiẓ got close to *masdijidiyyūn*, scholarly people of Basra, and received quite a good education (The Encyclopedia of Islam 1986, 385). Later on, he moved to Baghdad, where he expressed his deep interest in Greek philosophy. Here he started his career. The story of al-Djāḥiẓ as a gifted writer, reached the Caliph al-Ma'mūn. He ordered the writer to compile a treatise on laws and appointed him as an official of his chancellery to fulfill this task.

Due to his insight, cheerful character, education, and pro-Arab sympathies, the writer became widely accepted in the Caliphate. A special friendship connected him with Ibn az-Zayd (d. 847 AD), the vizier of the Caliphs al-Ma'mūn and al-Wathīq. After Ibn az-Zayd was dismissed, he made friends with some distinguished people in the court and the former vizier, 'Ahmad Ibn Abū Daūd, who was politically and literarily oppositional. Due to freethinking and Mu'tazilite ideas, the writer was frequently opposed

by theologians. However, these circumstances didn't hinder him from being the people's elected representative and accepted at court. In the final stage of life, when Mu'tazilites lost their impact on Islamic public worship, al-Djāhīz left Bagdad and moved to Basra, where he died being elderly (Filshtinsky 1985, 428).

As mentioned above, al-Djāhīz was a deeply educated person with encyclopedic knowledge. He has created almost 200 works that concern different fields: philosophy, theology, history, geography, chemistry, etc. All the works are mainly controversial. The writer used experiments and observations to find real and logical solutions to everything. He used to avoid mysticism. He is considered to be a theoretician of Arabic literature. He created the work entitled *The Book of Eloquence and Clarifications* (*Kitāb al-Bayān wa al-Tabyīn*), in which he discusses the literary style of medieval Arabic literature, linguistic principles, Arabic eloquence, etc. Despite his huge interest in scientific issues, he found his place in Arabic literature due to his literary works.

To understand al-Djāhīz's works, it is vital to know his political views. In his treatises, he attempted to prioritize the role of the Iranians and Arabs in the Caliphate. He was a supporter of Abbasides and a follower of Mu'tazilites at the same time. It seemed even incredible that a person with such political views had anything in common with Mu'tazilites, modulated based on Greko-Iranian philosophy. However, the philosophical and political beliefs of the writer were not controversial but closely connected with one another while formulating interesting concepts. Al-Djāhīz assumed that the strengthening of Arabs and Orthodox Islam was possible only if old views died out and new ones were formulated. Consequently, his political and social ideas influenced his works. The list of works by al-Djāhīz that reached the present period includes the *Epistle on Education and Rounding* (*Risālat al-Tarbī' wa al-Tadwīr*). Some Arab critics assume that this work represents the beginning stage of the *maqāma* genre. From the literary viewpoint, *The Book of Misers* (*Kitāb al-Bukhālā'*) and *The Book of Animals* (*Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*) are interesting as they belong to an early period of the 'Adab genre. They represent the collection of poems, stories, and sayings about animals, excerpts from stories written by Arab, Greek, and Persian writers, phrases from the Qur'an, Bible statements, etc. The author devotes special attention to the humorous narration of the stories and does not follow the sequence as it happens in all his other works. Compositional unity is not preserved in this work. The book ends with the glorification of wisdom and Allah, the creator of all animals who has endowed them with intelligence and insight.

*The Book of Animals* (*Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*) contains a description of the animal's natural characteristics, aphoristic sayings (*Ḥikma*), didactics ('Adab), and humorous elements. The author uses excerpts from his contemporary literary and scientific works concerning the issue of the connection between human and animal nature, together with popular poems, sayings, and aphorisms. Al-Djāhīz emphasizes that he has written this book in order to talk about those characteristics of animals that prove the wisdom and omnipotence of Allah.

*The Book of Animals* (*Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*) was published in 1907 in Egypt in seven volumes. Additionally, the publication of 1938 [1357] is well-performed and includes the comments of 'Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn. Its Arabic sources are represented by the works of 'Al-Asma'i, Abū 'Ubayda, Abū Zayd Sa'īd ibn 'Aws al-Anṣārī, Abū 'Ishāq 'Ibrāhīm ibn Sayyār ibn Hānī' an-Nazzām, and one of the Mu'tazilite leaders, Bishr ibn al-Mu'tamir (Al-Fakhoury 1959, 77). The author is well aware of them. He has two big *qasidas*, which contain the description of animals and Greek sayings about animals. Al-Djāhīz united these two *qasidas* in his book and added comments. As sources, he used Qur'an and *Ḥadīth*, the stories of the legend guardians, Arabic folklore, and finally, his conversations with contemporary scientists and doctors, who helped him significantly. Among foreign sources should be noted the works by Aristotle, the author of a nineteen-volume book about animals, translated into Arabic by Yaḥyā (or Yuhannā) ibn al-Biṭrīq. Al-Djāhīz borrowed some information from Claudius Galenus/Galen<sup>1</sup>. He also used Persian sources, particularly the legends of the fire-worshippers, and borrowed a large part from Arabic and Christian religions.

Al-Djāhīz didn't limit the book to the description of the animals' natural characteristics only. Beyond the topic, he manages to transform his book into a unique work from a scientific and literary viewpoint. Apart from information concerning animals, the book contains rich materials about other issues. Serious tone interchanges with humor, science with literature, wit with cynicism.

<sup>1</sup> Claudius Galenus/Galen (129-216) – Roman philosopher of Greek origin, considered the father of pharmacology.

*The Book of Animals (Kitāb al-Ḥayawān)* consists of seven parts (Al-Fakhoury 1959, 77). The first part contains an introduction, where al-Djāḥiẓ responds to critics and mentions their works. Later on, the author talks about the book's value and the necessity to buy it. This is followed by the second chapter on the castration of animals and its benefits, which is a prelude to the section on animals, where only dogs and roosters are mentioned. The third part is devoted to pigeons, flies, ravens, etc. It also contains the author's digressions on the themes of sincerity, insight, and madness. The fourth part is devoted to ants, monkeys, pigs, snakes, and ostriches. In digressions, the author analyses fire and its place in the religion of Arabs and other peoples. The fifth part consists of two parts. The first contains the summary of the discussion about fire and the definition of some lines from the Qur'an. It talks about Christian and Jewish panegyrics, fire-worshippers, low and despicable people. The second part is devoted to mice, rats, cats, etc. Additionally, it discusses the distinction between humans and animals. The sixth part includes the comments on al-Bahran's *qasida* concerning animals, as well as the comments on two *qasidas* by Bishr ibn al-Mu'tamir, and discussions about cowardice and revenge among Arabs. Apart from this, the author talks about animals and birds: ungulates, crocodiles, rabbits, etc. The seventh part is dedicated to the book's main purpose – proof of the omnipotence and wisdom of Allah. Here, Allah's wisdom is discussed in terms of the animal world, the knowledge, cowardice, and courage he endowed the animals with, and their intelligence that helps them protect themselves. This chapter tells about elephants, giraffes, and other animals.

As for the compositional peculiarities of the book, the author says,

When [the reader] gets apart from the Qur'an ayahs, he will move to [a literary] work; when he gets away from it, he narrates [historical] tales; after that, he will move to poems, from poems to anecdotes, from anecdotes to Greek wise sayings and strict rules; after that, he won't leave this section, [however], it can be most boring and tiredness from it [comes] sooner – unless he [again] moves to entertainment, jokes, nonsense, and nonsense; [however], I don't think that it is nonsense (Al-Djāḥiẓ 1965, 5).

He continues,

In this book, there are samples from poetry and various stories so that the reader of the book moves from one type to another, from one form to another; truly, I have seen that ears were weary of merry sounds, beautiful songs, and expressive strings, if it [continues] for too long; and if the beginnings of useless books followed this method, it could be the best prevention against difficulties; this is our goal in all of this, in order to let you benefit from it (Al-Djāḥiẓ 1965, 5).

Al-Djāḥiẓ acts as the mentor who teaches Arab scientists. He wants his listeners to benefit from his lessons and attempts to reach distinctiveness while conveying his ideas: words should not tire you – they should attain your hearts and minds. He thinks the best method is to move from one topic to another; serious discussion should be altered with humor, and we see that he does so. It seems that he is not ashamed of risky jokes and obvious obscenity. It's as if he regrets having to write this way but sees no other solutions and says,

If I had a bad opinion about those who express a desire for science and write books in our era, I wouldn't have to adapt to them, attract them, smoothen their souls, and encourage their hearts. I would not have to apologize for the content of my book as if I wish the best for those who wish them the worst (Al-Djāḥiẓ 1965, 7).

The author admits that writing the book this way is more difficult for him than writing about one topic without digressions. Hence, the book is not distinguished with compositional unity, and the author does not follow logic and requirements. He takes into account the taste of a reader. Al-Djāḥiẓ is seen here as a scholar and writer fond of science and literature, like a Mu'tazilite inclined to polemics. This inclination is so huge that if the writer can't find a real opponent in his dispute, he creates debates between two or more people who argue on the topic interesting to them. For instance, while talking about a dog and a rooster, he constructs the images of their friends that start enumerating their virtues, fostering their actions with ancient legends, stories, anecdotes, phrases from the Gospel, Qur'an, *Ḥadīth*, etc.

The historic importance of *The Book of Animals* attracts our attention while studying it. Here, we find diverse information about the Arab and other people's history, culture, customs, beliefs, and social relationships. All these prove the author's erudition.

It should be emphasized that if precursors of al-Djāhiz were specialized in one or two fields of science, he himself was not specialized in a particular one. He tried to gain universal knowledge, understand everything sensibly, and express his new ideas in science. *The Book of Animals* is the best example of this.

He used all scientific research methods of that time. In the introduction, he notes,

This is a book where the interest toward [all] people is the same; Arabs and non-Arabs are equal in it because this book is Arab, Bedouin, and Muslim. It deals with philosophical issues and combines theoretical knowledge, experimental science, literate science with practice, and mental perception with instinctive experience (Al-Djāhiz 1965, 8).

Consequently, al-Djāhiz relied on both feelings and reason in his research. The crucial point in his studies is observation, enriched by experience, hypotheses, comparison, and classification. In his opinion, "any declaration, which is rejected by observation, is an obvious mistake, an absurd theory that indicates great stubbornness or stupidity" (Al-Djāhiz 1965, 10). He widely used experimental methods: cut out individual organs from animals, tested the effect of various poisons on them, studied the structure of internal organs, gathered enemies, and watched them fighting; thus, he studied the effect and survival instincts. He also relied on the theories introduced to him while communicating with scientists of that time. However, while using these theories, he tried to obtain independent assertions relying on his own theoretical conclusions. Therefore, sometimes he thoroughly used other scientists' data, and sometimes confirmed or denied their doubts.

Al-Djāhiz subjected the perception of the environment to the criticism of the mind. He said, "Do not go where your eyes take you; go where your mind takes you. Everything has two essences: an essence [accessible] to the senses and a hidden essence [accessible] to the mind." He considered doubt as the beginning of research; while searching for the truth, he relied on experience and the laws of logic. He believed that doubt is the way toward the truth, so he said, "You should know the objects of doubt and the ways leading to them to perceive the truth". It seems that doubt was not a self-purpose for him but a means of knowledge. Therefore, he combined doubt with scientific criticism. He was very fond of discussing fairy tales and harshly criticizing their authors. He was relentless in debates, not sparing even Aristotle himself. This way led him to the truth.

Al-Djāhiz played a major role in the development of Arabic prose. The thematic diversity, simplicity, and originality of his creations brought the writer worldwide popularity.

## References:

- Al-Fakhoury, Hanna. 1959-1961. *Istoriya arabskoj literatury*. Tom II. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo inostrannoj litteratury (in Russian).
- Filshtinsky, I. M. 1985. *Istoriya arabskoj literatury V — nachala X vv.* Moscow: Glavnaya redaktsiya vostochnoj literatury (in Russian).
- Al-Djāhiz, 'Abū 'Uthmān 'Amr b. Baḥr. 1965. *Kitāb al-ḥayawān. al-djuz' al-'awwal. taḥqīq wa sharḥ* 'Abd as-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn (in Arabic).
- The Encyclopedia of Islam*. 1986. New Edition, Prepared by Number of Leading Orientalists, Edited by B. Lewis, Ch. Pellat and J. Schacht, Under the Patronage of the International Union of Academies, Vol. II, C-G. Leiden: E. J. Brill.