

BETWEEN ARTIFICE AND NATURE: THE CRITICAL DIALECTIC OF *LUZŪM MĀ LĀ YALZAM* IN ARABIC POETICS

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Abstract: *The practice of luzūm mā lā yalzam in Arabic poetics embodies a critical paradox that is celebrated as linguistic mastery yet condemned as artificial affectation. This study discusses how the Arabic rhetorical tradition dealt with this tension and provides a distinction between what would classify as legitimate works of art and those that would be viewed as merely technical excess. It examined the evolution of the core ‘adam al-kulfah (absence of strain) criterion in classical treatises and examined its enforcement through the critical reception of practitioners like al-Ma’arrī by integrating Koselleck’s Conceptual History and Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Findings indicate a dynamic criterion-based system wherein legitimacy hinges not on avoiding constraint but on subordinating it to semantic inevitability and natural flow that effectively shifts debate from whether constrained writing should be permitted or successfully executed within the parameters of its legitimacy. This study concluded that tradition resolved the paradox through an ongoing recursive dialogue between theory and criticism by offering a model for understanding how the realities of literary aesthetics are negotiated and the process by which an aesthetic norm of legitimacy is established and enforced in the traditions of literature.*

Keywords: *Arabic Rhetoric; Constrained Writing; Luzūm mā lā Yalzam; Literary Theory; Aesthetic Legitimacy*

Introduction

While constrained writing, which is the deliberate imposition of voluntary formal rules, appears in global literary traditions, it finds a distinctive and complex expression in Arabic poetics through a mechanism known as *luzūm mā lā yalzam* (adhering to what is not obligatory) (Baetens & Poucel, 2009; Deming, 2009). This technique involves a poet's consistent employment of an additional letter, syllable or phonetic pattern immediately preceding the mandatory rhyme (al-Hāshimī, 1999). It has been regarded as a pinnacle of linguistic mastery and a legitimate rhetorical figure (*badī'ī*), while at times condemned as an artificial affectation (*takalluf*) (Ḥabannakah, 1996).

Luzūm is extensively documented in the literature from its early dramatic use through organized implementation in several authors' works, including al-Ma'arrī (Sperl, 2023; Stetkevych, 2018). The tradition itself anchors the device's legitimacy in a core criterion derived from divine precedent, namely the condition of '*adam al-kulfah* (absence of strain). This principle dictates that any additional formality must not interfere with the natural apperception and the implied or literal sense of a word or phrase, as defined in the al-Qur'an (al-Marāghī, 1993; al-Ṣa'īdiy, 2005). Modern studies have further analysed *luzūm* through various theoretical lenses, such as speech act theory or formalism, to explore its philosophical and generative dimensions (al-Yāzījī, 1942; Būsa'īd, 2024; Dahmani, 2015; Nāyif, 2021; Nuṣṣāh, 2018).

Nevertheless, a significant methodological gap persists in this robust literature. Despite the acknowledged centrality of '*adam al-kulfah*, there is a lack of a synthetic analysis to determine how the rhetorical tradition dynamically enforced this standard through a recursive dialogue between theoretical codification and applied criticism. This study bridges this gap by demonstrating how Arabic rhetoric resolved the *luzūm* paradox by establishing a dynamic criterion-based legitimization system (Nigst, 2013). It employed an integrated methodology, namely Koselleck's conceptual history, to reconstruct this system by tracing the legitimizing criterion's evolution, while Fairclough's critical discourse analysis examined how this criterion had discursively manifested, mainly in practitioners' critique, such as al-Ma'arrī.

This study provides insight into how the Arabic rhetorical tradition cultivated a distinctive aesthetic of concealed constraint through its re-creation of the dialectical relationship between codified theory and applied critique. It identifies the tradition as a sociocultural system in which aesthetic norms are actively negotiated and enforced, while offering a model for understanding how literary traditions deal with the continuing tension between artistic discipline and creative freedom.

Methodology

This study adopted an integrated methodological approach to examine the establishment of *luzūm mā lā yalzam*'s legitimacy through the Arabic rhetorical tradition. Two qualitative methods were used to evaluate the theoretical principles and their practical application.

This study's first method was to conduct a conceptual-historical analysis, as articulated by Reinhart Koselleck (1982, 1989, 2004), which treats core concepts as historically dynamic rather than static. This approach provides the tools to systematically trace the evolution of *luzūm* and the formation of '*adam al-kulfah* as a central aspect used to provide legitimacy to classical treatises. The second method involved the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), drawn from Fairclough (2013) three-dimensional model, which views how language is used as a form of social practice affected by power and ideology (Perangin-angin et al., 2023; Pešić, 2022). It

examined textual strategies and evaluative lexicon used by these critiques to reveal how critics discursively enforced aesthetic boundaries by appealing to authoritative intertexts, like the al-Qur'an (Bezar et al., 2023; Khan, 2025; Molla-Ebrahim & Kamali, 2025; Shakeel & Arshad, 2023).

This integrated approach enabled a dialectical examination of the tradition's aesthetic regulation. Conceptual history reconstructs the genealogy of the rule ('*adam al-kulfah*'), while CDA analyses how this rule was operationalized as a tool of judgment through specific discursive strategies. Together, they model the tradition's recursive logic, whereby the concept provides legitimacy to critical discourse and, in turn, critical discourse tests and develops the concept through continued use.

Results

Theoretical Framework and Core Criterion

This section synthesizes the evolving conceptual framework that legitimizes *luzūm*, and traces how '*adam al-kulfah*' became the core criterion and how critics applied it.

The Semantic Field of Constraint

The primary term itself, *luzūm mā lā yalzam* (adhering to what is not obligatory), establishes a dialectic between voluntary discipline and natural freedom (al-Suyūṭī, 1988). This oppositional relationship is reflected in its synonyms, such as *al-i'nāṭ* (to impose excessive hardship), *al-tadyīq* (constriction) and *al-tashdīd* (intensification), that underscore its rigorous and self-imposed challenge, while the simpler *al-ilzām* denotes the act of commitment itself (al-Mīdanī, 2011; Ḥabannakah, 1996).

The conceptual evolution of *luzūm* culminated in the formalization of '*adam al-kulfah*', as its legitimizing criterion. Early theorists, like Ibn al-Mu'tazz (1990), classified it as being one of the *beauties of speech*. The criterion was explicitly codified by al-Suyūṭī (1974), who defined *luzūm* as adhering to extra letters "on the condition of no artificial effort" (*bi shart 'adam al-kulfah*). Modern scholars, such as al-Hāshimī (1999) and Ḥabannakah (1996), further systematized the definition and reiterated that the device must not be artificially pursued.

'Adam al-Kulfah (Absence of Strain)

Early theorists, like Ibn al-Athīr (1939), warned that such composition must not become *forced or unnatural* (*mutakallif aw waḥshī*), since this could lead to a piece being unappealing or *repulsive to hear*. This advice was recorded as a formal principle in the systematic treatises of later authorities. al-Suyūṭī's (1974) canonical definition explicitly stipulates that the extra letters must adhere to "on the condition of no strain" (*bi shart 'adam al-kulfah*). The same condition has been preserved by modern grammarians, such as Qasim (2003), as part of their critical rules about what is acceptable in written language.

This criterion also served as a practical source of criticism since its inception. Ibn al-Mu'tazz (1990) cited a verse often attributed to the poet Aws bin Tha'labah, proverbially known as "self-chastisement" ('*iqāb al-mar' li nafsih*') due to its use of a double-letter *luzūm*:

عَصَانِي قَوْمِي وَالرَّشَادُ الَّذِي بِهِ ... أَشْرْتُ وَمَنْ يَعِصُ الْمُجْرِبَ يَنْدَمُ
فَلَا تَجْرَعُوا مِمَّا جَنَّتْهُ أَعْفَاقُكُمْ ... وَلَا تَنْدَمُوا مَاذَا بَحِينُ تَنْدَمُ
فَصَبْرًا بَنِي بَكْرٍ عَلَى الْقَتْلِ إِنِّي ... أَرَى عَارِضًا يَنْهَلُ بِالمَوْتِ وَالدَّمِ

My people disobeyed me and the guidance which, by it,
I pointed; and whoever disobeys the experienced one will regret.
So do not grieve for what your own hands have committed,
nor regret (anything) at the time of regret.
So have patience, sons of Bakr, against being killed,
for I see a cloud pouring down with death and blood.

The line commits *mīm* and *dāl* before the *rawī* in *yandami* (يَنْدَم) and *wa al-dami* (وَالدَّمَ) (al-Damīrī, 2008; al-Musta'shimī, 2015). Later critics have argued that the construction should be determined by whether the restriction provides an appropriate and essential relationship between the abstract meaning of *regret* and the physical imagery of *blood*. It would lack substantive construction if the connection is deemed forced and serves only to meet the formal constraint. This shows how the criterion was originally used to differentiate the creative artistry of the organic from natural construction and those that were artificially created.

Typologies and Classifications

Formalizing the core criterion led to detailed taxonomies, primarily developed through Qur'anic exegesis. Theoretical works progressively systematized *luzūm* into detailed typologies. One of the salient differences currently recognised is between adherence by *letter* (*ḥarf*) and adherence by *vowel movement* (*ḥarakah*), with the former being the more obvious and the latter requiring a level of artistry that was typical amongst poets such as Ibn al-Rūmī (d. 283/896) (al-Ḥimyarī, 1999). The most complex taxonomies are based on the number and type of additional elements committed before the rhyme scheme. al-Suyūfī's foundational work created a new typology of rhyme schemes that ranged from simple single-letter commitments to complex patterns that included consonants, vowels and even diacritical markers, like the *shaddah*.

The adherence to *hā'* and *fathah* before *rā'* in al-Ḍuḥā (93:9-10) produces a semantically precise pair, as in *taqhar* (oppress) versus *tanhar* (rebuff), where switching the verbs would void the ethical lesson (al-Baghawī, 1999; Darwish, 1994). More complex examples, such as the three-letter adherence in al-A'rāf (7:201-2), demonstrate that multi-element constraints can remain smooth and meaningful (Al-Mīdanī, 2011). It is crucial that exegetes distinguish voluntary *luzūm* from obligatory rhyme elements (*ridf*), as seen in al-'Ādiyāt (100:6-8), in order to prevent misclassification (al-Mu'ayyad, 2002). This precision underscores that *luzūm* is an *optional* constraint layered atop the obligatory rhyme, a distinction that separates it from related devices like *tarsī'* (internal rhyme) (Jalolovna, 2023).

Position in 'Ilm al-Badī'

This practice is consistently classified in the field of rhetorical studies (known as '*ilm al-badī'*') as a verbal ornament (*muḥassin lafzī*) that is related to sonic patterning rather than one defined by meaning (Hadi, 2021; 'Abbas, 1997). Its status was the subject of contention and shifted over time. Ibn al-Mu'tazz (1990) had documented *luzūm* in a different manner compared to his catalogue of five core *colours* of *badī'*, where he claimed that *luzūm* resided in a much broader category of the *beauties of speech* (*maḥāsin al-kalām*). It was widely claimed to be an accepted poetic form by the time it was later systematised, like in al-Qazwīnī's (d. 739/1338) in *Talkhīṣ al-Miftāḥ fī al-Ma'ānī wa al-Bayān wa al-Badī'* (2024). Hence, its legitimacy was always conditional upon seamless execution.

The Case of al-Ma'arrī

This subsection evaluates the efficacy and application where the theoretical basis governing this technique is tested, imposed and refined as applied to the most famous and significant example of its use by the poet Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī (d. 449/1057).

Mastery vs. Strain

Al-Ma'arrī's definitive association with the mechanism is documented in his monumental work *Luzūmiyyāt*, a *diwan* that pushes the mechanism to a new level of complexity (Ibn Khallikān, 1994). He imposed systematic constraints by adhering to four and even five extra letters in rhymes (*darā'irhum*, *ṣarā'irhim*, *sarā'irhum*) (Darwish, 1994). Stetkevych (2023) places this hyper-sophisticated practice in late 'Abbāsīd poetics by arguing that this mechanism functions as a form of poetic asceticism and epistemological critique, which is a conscious rejection of earlier oral-performative aesthetics in favour of a written and intellectually rigorous ideal.

This study identified three key strategies used in the reception of al-Ma'arrī for enforcing the 'adam al-kulfah criterion of through the CDA.

1) Polarized Evaluative Lexicon

One strategy is to present celebratory assessments of al-Ma'arrī's work using positive lexicon by referring to the poet's *mastery*, with critics like al-Rāfi'ī (2020) praising al-Ma'arrī's achievement of *al-ghāyah* “الغاية” (the utmost limit) and *nudrah* “نُدْر” (rarity) of his command. This terminology (*al-ghāyah*, *nudrah*, *itqān*) discursively frames successful constraint as a virtuous skill and intellectual supremacy.

Conversely, the negative pole is represented by a condemnatory lexicon. For example, Ibn al-Athīr (1956) described instances of forced verses as *qabīḥ* “قبيح” (repulsive) and *waḥshī* “وحشي” (harsh), while calling a poet who exceeds predesignated limits, *takalluf* “تكلف” (affectation). This lexical polarization performs a judgment using evaluative terms to claim a poet's work as being either socially valued mastery or devalued excess.

2) Intertextual Framing

The primary intertext was based on the seamless or semantically inevitable *luzūm* found in the al-Qur'an. The critics pointed toward sporadic and organic occurrence of *luzūm* in Jāhiliyyah poetry although they frequently claimed that the only genuine examples of *it* were not those that came later in a form of systematic practice. They cited verses that were found in poetic works, such as works by al-Nābighah al-Dhubayānī (d. c. 604 CE) (al-Mīdanī, 2011):

ولكنني كنتُ امرءاً لي جانبٌ ... من الأرض فيه مسترادٌ ومهربٌ
ملوكٌ وإخوانٌ إذا ما لقيتهم ... أحكم في أموالهم وأقربُ

But truly, I was a man who possessed a side,
A part of the land wherein lies a refuge and an escape route.
Kings and brothers are they; when I meet them,
I am granted judgment over their wealth and am brought near.

Repetition of the letter *rā'* before the *rawī* in consecutive lines, *mahrabu* (مَهْرَب) and *uqarrabu* (أَقْرَب), was seen by some as a spontaneous effusion of a powerful natural disposition (*tab' sālim*) and not as a calculated constraint (al-Hāshimī, 1967; al-Qayrawānī, 1981). Critics

discursively position al-Ma'arrī's work in a valued tradition by linking his systematic and ambitious work (*Luzūmiyyāt*) with the perceived lost naturalness of art, even as they measure it against their notion of an *ideal* and effortless origin.

3) Metaphorical Reasoning

The concept of failure was also framed by a strong metaphor. Ibn al-Athīr (1956) provided one of the sharpest critiques by identifying specific lines that he considered to be *harsh* and *repulsive to natural disposition*. He crystallized this failure with an analogy that indicates the ideology behind the judgment:

مثل الصانع الذي يأخذ مصوغاً ردياً فيجيد فيه عمله، ويخرج فيه بديع صنعه فيكون عند ذلك قد رعى
الفرع،
وأهمل الأصل، فتذهب جودة الصنعة فيه رداة المصوغ

Such forced composition is like a skilled jeweller perfecting a base piece of metal... the quality of the craftsmanship is lost in the baseness of the material.

Ibn al-Athīr's condemnation holds significant meaning because he occupied a prominent role in the established scholarly community that existed in the late Abbasid period, for whom the science of rhetoric (*balāghah*) was an essential component in the *madrasah* curriculum that was meant to nurture the cultural and linguistic norms at that time (Stetkevych, 2010). His judgment, hence, functions not merely as aesthetic evaluation but also serves to reinforce the institutional authority that polices the boundaries of acceptable practice from a socio-culturally-sanctioned expertise position (Abdul-Latif, 2023).

Many critics of al-Ma'arrī categorized him according to the '*adam al-kulfah*' criterion because of this distinction by using textual and intertextual strategies to define the boundaries of acceptable practices in their culture and celebrating what they perceive as aligned with their own ultimate authority and excluding what does not.

Self-Awareness and Poetic Rivalry

al-Ma'arrī, just like Ibn al-Athīr, regarded himself to be self-aware and competitive of the various forms of constraints under which he was working and upon which the critics would eventually build their historical lineage. He explicitly positioned his work in a tradition of constrained writing that acknowledges his predecessors and asserts his own innovation.

He recognized the Umayyad poet Kuthayyir 'Azzah as a pioneer renowned for his extended *Tā'iyah* that adheres to the letter *lām* before the rhyme *tā'* throughout dozens of verses, a poem considered the first major, systematic *luzūmiyyah*. Nevertheless, al-Ma'arrī's ambition was to surpass this model and he had articulated in one of his verses, as noted by exegetes, that he possesses a distinct form of mastery (Darwish, 1994):

كثير أنا في حرفي أهبت له ... في التاء يلزم حرفاً غير يلتزم

I am, in my letter, one who adheres... to a letter other than the one adhered to

This statement reflects a sophisticated piece of poetic meta-commentary, as it uncovers a competitive atmosphere among poets and a claim of unique inventiveness. Al-Ma'arrī had positioned himself not simply as a copycat by saying that he adheres to a letter *other* than the

one he adhered to; rather, he is claiming to be inventive by complicating and diversifying the existing art. He implies that Kuthayyir mastered a single, fixed constraint, while his own *Luzūmiyyāt*, with its programmatic exploration of the entire Arabic alphabet and complex multi-letter adherences, represents a higher order of systematic craft.

The Quranic Benchmark of Semantic Inevitability

The highest form of intertextual strategy is to utilize the al-Qur'an as the ultimate and definitive criterion for aesthetic judgment, which raises aesthetic judgment from a stylistic preference level to a theological foundation level (Adel & Maasoum, 2011). Analysis of exemplary verses, such as al-Ḍuḥā (93: 9-10), goes far beyond a simple appreciation for the beauty of sound, as it reveals an essential semantical dimension.

فَأَمَّا الْيَتِيمَ فَلَا تَقْهَرْ ٩ وَأَمَّا السَّائِلَ فَلَا تَنْهَرْ ١٠

So as for the orphan, do not oppress [him]. And as for the petitioner, {- Anyone who seeks aid or knowledge.} do not repel [him].

The committing of *hā*' before *rā*' produces a verb pair of precise lexical calibration, where *taqhar* (تَقْهَرُ), referring to the oppression of the weak and helpless nature of the orphan, versus *tanhar* (تَنْهَرُ), meaning to a verbal rebuff from someone making a request (al-Baghawī, 1999; al-Zamakhsharī, 1986). Here, the *luzūm* creates an exact match of two verbs addressing each recipient's distinct plight (al-Rāzī, 1999; Ibn 'Āshūr, 1984). According to al-Darwīsh (1994), switching these verbs would void the moral lesson and therefore, render the constraint semantically indispensable.

On the contrary, in the divine exemplar, the mechanism ceases to be an *adherence to what is not obligatory*. It becomes the discovery of the *obligatory form* for a given meaning, where an arbitrary formal rule emerges as the necessary linguistic vessel for a precise ethical lesson (al-Qarnī, 2024). This fusion of sound, sense and sacred precedent established the supreme benchmark against which all human *luzūm* was measured. It provided critics with an authoritative model of semantic inevitability that enables them to wield '*adam al-kulfah*', not merely as a stylistic criterion but as a theological and ethical gauge to distinguish legitimate artistry from mere *takalluf*.

The Theory-Practice Dialectic

This section traces the interdependent relationship between the prescriptive theory of *luzūm* and the practical criticism of its practitioners, which is a dialectical process where theory shapes criticism, and vice versa.

Constructing a Historical Lineage

Critics did not view practitioners as isolated individuals; instead, they sought to create a historical lineage for *luzūm* that would serve to legitimize the practice by grounding it in tradition and establish a spectrum of validity based on how *natural* the execution was perceived.

The critical tradition did not view practitioners in isolation but actively constructed a historical lineage for *luzūm*, putting them along a spectrum of legitimacy defined by the core '*adam al-kulfah*' criterion. This spectrum originated in the pre- and early-Islamic periods, where poets, such as al-Nābighah al-Dhubaynī, were celebrated as the purest form of spontaneous instinct (*ṭab'an*), entirely free of affectation (al-Shayzarī, 1987). The practice entered a phase of

conscious systematization in the Umayyad era, most notably with Kuthayyir ‘Azzah’s extended *Tā’iyyah*, which established a deliberate formal model. The pivotal test arrived with al-Ma’arrī’s *Luzūmiyyāt*, where he completely transformed the mechanism from an instinctual use of craft to a technical tool for composing poetry, making it impossible for a critic to determine the legitimacy of a poem’s use of *luzūm* without applying the ‘*adam al-kulfah*’ concept. This led to a bifurcation in critical response whereby critics praised the *seamlessly* masterful verse of *luzūm* practitioners while denouncing the verses that evidently portrayed the poet’s strains and difficulties. As the continuum passed beyond this critical pinnacle, the critics established rigid rules about the form of illegitimacy. For example, the extreme and meaning-subordinating prose artifices of al-Ḥarīrī were dismissed as the very embodiment of *takalluf*. Likewise, most of the later poets’ imitative poetry were largely criticized for demonstrative excess. Thus, critics reflected a coherent historical progression in their aesthetic philosophy. This philosophy supported the rejection of all visible constraints that tended to subordinate individual creativity to mere formal exercise.

Operationalizing Theoretical Terms in Criticism

The reception of al-Ma’arrī’s *Luzūmiyyāt* served as the primary arena for this operationalization that acted as a real-time test of the ‘*adam al-kulfah*’ criterion.

In practice, critics have defined the key negative term *kulfah* or *takalluf* (strain/affectation) not as the mere presence of constraint, but as the perceptible moment where the mechanics of constraint visibly control the naturalness, beauty or flow of language (syntax and semantics). This was identified through specific textual features, such as the use of archaic or exceptionally weak diction (*al-waḥsh al-mustakraḥ*), presence of awkward or at times incongruent syntax, or semantic incoherence forced solely to meet the rhyming commitment. Ibn al-Athīr’s (1939) critique exemplifies this by dismissing lines where the constraint had produced phrases that “natural disposition rejects” (*tathibu ‘anhu al-saliqah*). This operational definition moved *takalluf* from a vague accusation to an actual diagnosable flaw based on the perceived breach between form and meaning.

The positive counterpart behind *kulfah* or *takalluf* is *ṣinā’ah* (skillful artifice), defined in a similar framework, but the metric by which the overall skilfulness is judged does not solely follow the rules. It instead follows the success of a composer when the constraint is integrated effortlessly and remained inconspicuous as a mechanism of poetic construction while serving the poet’s higher semantic, rhetorical, and/or sonic goals (Al-Arfī, 2025). This process of operationalization was powerfully advanced through metaphorical reasoning (Thibodeau et al., 2017). Ibn al-Athīr’s (1956) analogy of the jeweller perfecting the material form of base metal had operationalized the concept by illustrating the consequences of not adhering to *al-kulfah* and the negative implications associated with that violation. The metaphor explains *why* such a verse was rejected as it represented a catastrophic misalignment of value, where exquisite craft (*itqān al-ṣinā’ah*) was squandered on unworthy linguistic material (*radī’ al-maṣnū’*). This same metaphor served as the basis for later criticism that allowed for an established and commonly understood cognitive model, whereby it further consolidated the aesthetic judgment and converted a theoretical concept into a memorable and commonly recognized evaluative criterion that could be used for evaluating new artistic works (Johnson, 1983). It is for this reason that the theoretical term (*kulfah*) was not just defined but *designed* and *enriched* through the discursive practice of criticism itself.

Policing Boundaries in Genres and Eras

The dialectic between theory and practice has provided a durable framework for the evaluation of artistic creation in genres and eras. The same evaluative framework is also applied to prose genres, and this demonstrates its adaptability in different sociocultural contexts.

The paradigmatic case is the critical reception of al-Ḥarīrī and his hyper-constrained *risālah*, *al-Sīniyyah* and *al-Shīniyyah*, which were written for particular patrons in the context of a courtly *majlis* performance, where every single word contains the letter *sīn* (س) and *shīn* (ش), turning the visible mechanics of constraint into the entire premise. Critics like al-Rāfi‘ī (2020) (d. 1937), using the same criterion (*‘adam al-kulfah*) and metaphorical reasoning (scorpion’s spell), dismiss this displays of linguistic and compositional virtuosity as the epitome of artificial *takalluf*.

This judgment demonstrates the framework’s power to mediate between different disparate sociocultural environments (scholarly vs. courtly *majlis* aesthetics), and asserting itself by establishing a hierarchy (primacy) of scholastic and meaning-centred values. In other words, the *sīn* and *shīn* were the master and, consequently, the meaning was its servant. This indicates that, even if a text is in a radically different genre, the framework functions perfectly to identify the points at which textual virtuosity is transformed into vacuity, and this degrades meaning.

Leading modern theorists, like al-‘Atīq (2002) and al- Mīdanī (2011), expressed similar concerns about the way decaying applications of poetry emerged from the aesthetic use of poetic devices. They encouraged poets to refrain from being limited by the mechanism’s constraints, while at the same time letting their creativity guide the emergence of the mechanisms based on the poem’s meaning. As such, they emphasized the importance of maintaining a balance between theory and practice in order to continue to define the boundary between artistry/success and filler/excess.

The Pursuit of Semantic Inevitability

This dialectic points to a key aesthetic principle, namely the highest form of art makes artifice seem inevitable. The theoretical requirements of *‘adam al-kulfah* and the appreciation for seamless verses coincide with the notion articulated by ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī, in that all meanings must find their own natural expression through language (Ḥabannakah, 1996):

لا يحس هذا النوع إلا إذا كانت الألفاظ تابعة للمعاني، فإن المعاني إذا أرسلت على سجيته،
وتركت وما تريد طلبت لأنفسها الألفاظ، ولم تكتس إلا ما يليق بها

This type [of rhetorical beauty] is only perceived when words follow meanings. For when meanings are released according to their intrinsic nature and left to what they intend, they seek for themselves the appropriate words and clothe themselves only in what suits them.

This is not merely a stylistic approach, but also a conceptual one; whereby the true beauty of expression occurs when thought is represented through the natural agent that expresses it. This principle can be applied to *luzūm* in which imposition through an added phonetic restriction should not be viewed as artificial restraints, but rather as a requirement of the meaning itself to be phonetically organized. Al-Jurjānī then warned that violating this principle leads to superficial ornamentation, quoting Abū al-Ṭayyib (Ṣāhib al-‘Abbād, 1965):

إذا لم تشاهد غير حسن شياتها ... وأعضائها فالحسن عنك مغيب

If you behold nothing but the beauty of her garments and limbs,
then true beauty is hidden from you.

The phrase, “garments and limbs” refers to “external ornaments” and acknowledges that “true beauty” is concealed, intrinsic and saturated with meaning. In the context of *luzūm*, this serves as a warning to critique one's view of the phonetic pattern (sound) rather than the semantic clarity (meaning) created as a result of the word's phonetic structure. Therefore, reducing the device to empty virtuosity, having no substantive value beyond ornamental merit. The exegetical analysis of *luzūm* in the al-Qur'an, as in al-Qalam (68:2-3), provides examples of this ideal's realization:

مَا أَنْتَ بِنِعْمَةٍ رَبِّكَ بِمَجْنُونٍ ۚ وَإِنَّ لَكَ لَأَجْرًا غَيْرَ مَمْنُونٍ ۚ

You are not, [O Muḥammad], by the favour of your Lord, a madman.
And indeed, for you is a reward uninterrupted.

The commitment of the letters *wāw* and *nūn* (-wn) before the rhyme (*rawī*) *yā*' in “بِمَجْنُونٍ” and “مَمْنُونٍ”, create a deep semantic-theological link between the negation of insanity (*majnūn*) and the affirmation that the reward for good deeds/perpetual goodness will be eternal (*mamnūn*). The sound aspect of parallelism animates this relationship and reinforces the verse's argument that the Prophet (PBUH)'s sanity is as certain and enduring as his divine reward (al-Suyūṭī, 1974). The *luzūm* ceases and has transcended the status of optional ornamentation to now become the essential form of expressing the divine message's meaning .

Therefore, the entire theoretical-critical corpus can be viewed as an attempt to codify, in human artistry, rules for approaching this divine seamlessness. The tradition had guided poets through ongoing rule-making and testing to make constraint appear effortless and essential (al-Jurjānī, 1988, 2005).

Discussion

The findings reveal that Arabic rhetoric managed the *luzūm* ambiguity through a tripartite system or a sociocultural system of legitimization that comprised the conceptual codification of '*adam al-kulfah*', its discursive enforcement by an institutionalized critical establishment and a recursive dialectic between theory and practice that continually negotiated aesthetic boundaries.

CDA reveals that this was an ideological practice validated through institutional authority. The divided reception of al-Ma'arrī was a live performance of cultural stewardship by exegetes, grammarians and rhetoricians, whose professional identity was tied to the *madrasah* and its canon. Their praise or condemnation was an act of aligning poetic practice with the Qur'anic exemplar and pre-Islamic *tab'* that reinforced a scholarly aesthetic hegemony. This process actively constructed a “Them” (the courtly patron-driven artifice of al-Ḥarīrī), against which the scholarly “Us” defined its own legitimacy and purity (Brokensha, 2011; Wodak, 2008). In this way, '*adam al-kulfah*' was not a passive standard but an active discursive tool wielded for policing artistic borders.

Exegetes, such as al-Darwīsh (1994), demonstrated that in its perfect realization, the phonetic constraint yields a semantic relationship so precise that no alternative wording seems possible, as in the divinely-paired verbs “وَسَقَ” and “أَتَسَقَ” in al-Inshiqāq (84) 17-18:

وَأَلَيْلٍ وَمَا وَسَقَ ١٧ وَالْقَمَرَ إِذَا أَتَسَقَ ١٨

And [by] the night and what it envelops; and [by] the moon when it becomes full.

Here, the committed *sīn* before *qāf* does not merely create a rhyme but it phonetically binds the night’s gathering of all things with the moon’s reaching fullness, which reinforces a cosmic parallelism through sound. In this divine exemplar, *luzūm* is not an ornamental addition but the necessary linguistic form of the message itself. This ideal reflects al-Jurjānī’s “meaning-first” ontology of eloquence.

This ideal is not limited to religious texts or higher forms of literature. Rather, the tradition recognised that the most persuasive patterns of speech often organically embodied this principle. Various analysts, like Ṭāsh, also referenced different forms of proverbial and oratorical utterances, such as the saying attributed to the Prophet (PBUH) as natural exemplars (al-Musta’shimī, 2015; al-Rāzī, 2004; al-Tawhīdī, 1988):

فَإِنْ كَانَ كَرِيمًا أَكْرَمَكَ وَإِنْ كَانَ لَنِيْمًا أَسْلَمَكَ

If he is noble, he will honour you; if he is base, he will surrender you

In this case, the committed letters (*lām* and *mīm*) preceding the rhyme (*-ka*) do not serve as artificial confines, but they are formed out of the rhetorical structure of antithesis (*tibāq*) and reinforce the contrast between *karīm* (noble) and *la’īm* (base) (al-Mu’ayyad, 2002). The phonetic pattern creates a sense of semantic inevitability and is mnemonically potent, hence, demonstrating that the theoretical model for *luzūm* ultimately sought to describe, systematize and emulate the very mechanics behind successful and effective speech.

This approach offers a significant contribution to broader discourses on constrained writing. Unlike modern movements like Oulipo, which often celebrate the visible mechanics of constraint as an intellectual game, the Arabic tradition, that is governed by *’adam al-kulfah*, which valorises its concealment (Bowrey & Chan, 2022; Bray, 2018; Symes, 1999). Success is determined not by the complexity of a rule, but by its imperceptibility and the ability for meaningful connection with the reader.

The sociocultural system of regulation functions as a cycle of repeated constructions and concurrent evaluations. The codification of this rule (*’adam al-kulfah*), in scholarly treatises had authorized critics’ discourse. Their repeated socially-recognized application of this discourse in specific areas (evaluating court poetry or patron commissions) in turn validated the rule and reinforced their own institutional authority. This was not a closed textual loop but a social process. Therefore, this study provided a model whereby constraint becomes culturally legitimate when integrated into a self-sustaining *social* system and not when integrated into a self-sustaining *textual* system, where a specific community (the *’ulamā’*) use the theory-criticism dialectic to uphold its aesthetic principles and influence broader cultural production.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the Arabic rhetorical tradition resolved the paradox of *luzūm mā lā yalzam* by developing a sophisticated, self-sustaining sociocultural system of validation (Byrne, 2013; Hayakawa, 2017). The tradition’s solution was a generative triad: a core aesthetic criterion (*‘adam al-kulfah*), a discursive mechanism for its applied judgment wielded by a scholarly-critical establishment, and a recursive dialectic between theory and practice. This framework successfully shifted debate from the permissibility of constraint to the quality of its execution, regulating aesthetic norms across diverse spheres of cultural production, from the scholarly madrasah to the courtly majlis. Credibility thus rested not only on technical skill but on the artist’s success in aligning their work with the socioculturally dominant aesthetic ideology, one that valorized semantic inevitability and natural flow as defined by the Quranic exemplar and implemented by the custodial criticism of the *‘ulamā’* (Duncum, 2008; Soper, 1992).

Eventually, this study highlights a distinctive aesthetics of concealment within the Arabic tradition, contrasting with other global constrained writing practices (Guignon, 1990; Zuidervaart, 2004). This reconstruction opens several avenues for further research. The framework can serve as the basis for a comparative literary studies with other “rule-based” traditions (e.g., Oulipo, Chinese regulated verse), in order to determine the many different ways in which culture views the relationship between creativity and constraints. Moreover, the idea of *kulfah* (strain) offers the possibility of pursuing a cognitive-stylistic study of how constrained texts can influence the cognitive/perceptual reactions of readers, providing an empirical basis upon which to validate many of the aesthetic judgments made about classical texts. Finally, historical-sociological research could explore the practice of *luzūm* within specific contexts (e.g., Abbasid poetic rivalries, *maqāmāt* performances) to understand its social and performative aspects.

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