

## **Representations of the Travel Discourse in the Baghdad Maqama of Ibn Mihraz al-Wahrani**

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Received: 31-08-2025

Accepted: 10-10-2025

Published: 01-12-2025

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### **Abstract:**

This article aims to explore the representations of travel discourse within the genre of *maqama*, taking the Baghdad *Maqama* by Ibn Mihraz al-Wahrani as a case study. The *maqama* is a narrative genre capable of incorporating various literary genres. The features of travel are clearly manifested in al-Wahrani's *maqama* through the use of travel art characteristics such as narration, description, and the employment of the first-person pronoun (individual "I"), in addition to the diverse information contained within the *maqama*. The study concludes that the author, Ibn Mihraz al-Wahrani, successfully blended the genres of travel and *maqama* by drawing on the unique elements of each literary form.

**Keywords:** Algeria, Ibn Mihraz al-Wahrani, Genre Interference, *maqama*, travel

### **1. Introduction:**

Algeria has long been known for its diverse prose arts, among which the art of *maqamat* stands out prominently. This genre was introduced early in Algeria, particularly during the sixth century AH, when several notable figures emerged, foremost among them Ibn Mihraz al-Wahrani (d. 575 AH), the author of *maqamat* or *manamat*. It is well known that the *maqama* is originally an Eastern art form that spread its influence to the Maghreb and Al-Andalus, where it was

admired and emulated by writers who followed the footsteps of the Eastern masters.

The genre flourished in Algeria, especially during the Ottoman period, with a distinguished group of writers. Among them was Ahmed al-Buni, who authored a maqama around 1106 AH titled "I'lam al-Akhiyar bi-Ghara'ib al-Waqa'i 'wal-Akhbar" ("Informing the Virtuous about the Wonders of Events and News"), which discusses the relationship between scholars and political authority, and complains about the informers of the era. About a decade later, Muhammad bin Maimun composed a biography of the Algerian governor Muhammad Bekdash titled "Al-Tuhfa al-Murdiya fi al-Dawla al-Bakdashiyya fi Bilad al-Jazair al-Mahmiyya" ("The Pleasing Gift Regarding the Bekdash State in the Protected Land of Algeria"), divided into sixteen chapters, each called a maqama narrating aspects of the governor's life. Additionally, Ibn Hamdush al-Jazairi presented three maqamat in his travelogue published in Algeria

(Shawqi Daif, pp. 238-239).

As for al-Wahrani, in the sixth century AH, he composed his maqama entitled "Al-Baghdadiyya", named after the city where it was written—Baghdad. In this work, he addressed political issues concerning the Maghreb, such as discussions about the Mulaththimun and Almohad dynasties of the western Maghreb, the Fatimid state in Egypt, and other related matters framed within the form of a journey. Indeed, al-Wahrani's maqama represents a travelogue recounting his journey from his hometown Oran to the Mashriq, specifically Iraq. It is widely acknowledged that most of al-Wahrani's maqamat are Eastern in theme, which is natural, as he spent most of his life in the East (Abu Al-Qasim Sa'dallah, 1998, p. 207).

Historically, many journeys began in the Maghreb heading eastward to perform the pilgrimage (Hajj), pursue knowledge and jurisprudence, and explore other cultures through travel. This practice evolved into a literary genre beloved by Maghrebi writers, much like their Eastern counterparts, making the Mashriq their primary destination, and sometimes a preferred place to reside, as in the case of al-Wahrani. This partly explains the absence of Algerian literary studies on al-Wahrani's maqamat before the Ottoman era, as well as the lack of imitation of his work and that of the original masters like Badi' al-Zaman al-Hamadhani and al-Hariri (Shawqi Daif, p. 238).

Based on this theoretical background, the importance of this study lies in investigating the interaction and genre blending between the arts of maqama and travel in al-Wahrani's Al-Baghdadiyya. The study is guided by the following research questions:

- How is travel represented as a literary genre in Al-Baghdadiyya?
- To what extent did al-Wahrani successfully integrate the art of travel within the art of maqama?
- Did the author maintain the essential elements of both the travel and maqama genres in his maqama?

## **2. On the Arts of Maqama and the Travelogue:**

The maqama is considered one of the ancient narrative literary genres that embodies the short story genre, whose events typically unfold within a single session (a maqama). Its conclusion often presents either a moral lesson or a poignant point, with a strong emphasis on rhetorical embellishment. According to Ahmad Zaki Mubarak, maqamat are short stories that contain the intellectual content of the author in various forms — literary, philosophical, or glimpses of humor and indulgence (Mubarak, p. 199).

From these two definitions, it becomes clear that the maqama is a form of short storytelling traditionally narrated in a gathering, containing literary ideas and social values presented in a humorous and appealing style. It fundamentally relies on the kidiyya (begging or soliciting charity) as its basic theme.

The maqama is a narrative form that has firmly established itself within Arab culture, primarily through its reliance on imaginative storytelling that transcends the restrictions imposed by popular cultural norms about storytelling. This is mainly due to its educational and didactic purpose, although the imaginative narrative dimension dominates the entire text from beginning to end (Bakr, 1998, p. 08). The maqama also distinguishes itself by creating a unique form in both structure and content that sets it apart from other narrative genres.

The elements and characteristics of the maqama can be summarized as follows (Omar Faroukh, 1981, pp. 412-413): a narrator who recounts a tale from a gathering, a protagonist (makdi), a moral

or knot (point of conflict or joke), the story itself, the subject of the maqama, the title of the maqama, and the literary craftsmanship involved.

Maqamat are known for their elaborate literary craftsmanship and verbal sophistication (especially in the works of al-Hariri), which include abundant use of rhyme, rhetorical devices like paronomasia (wordplay), antithesis, balance, and other forms of eloquence.

Poetry: Although the maqama is primarily a prose narrative, it often includes small or large portions of poetry composed by the protagonist or other poets, sometimes recited by the protagonist himself. Poetry is used to demonstrate skill in composition or rhetorical finesse, especially in al-Hariri's works.

The maqama is also characterized by narration, dialogue, a storytelling style, and detailed descriptions that play an important role in depicting places, times, and characters, sometimes from an external perspective and other times from within.

As for the travelogue as a literary genre, its concept remains somewhat ambiguous and general. Some refer to it as the "art of travel," others as "travel literature," and some simply as "the travelogue." The term "travel literature" indicates its belonging to literary prose writing.

One definition describes the travelogue as: "A genre of composition that combines a deep emotional motivation with careful observation and detailed recording of sights and phenomena, along with insightful examination of causes and effects." (Zardoumi Ismail, p. 12).

This means that the travelogue is a prose art related to the lives of individuals and peoples visited by the traveler, who describes various aspects of their life and living conditions in an engaging literary style that captivates readers from beginning to end without boredom.

Travel texts, as a literary genre, belong to prose and include narration and description. They often feature visionary, recounted, or dreamlike scenes rooted in memory—sometimes based on tangible

reality (Shu'ayb Halifi, 2002 , p. 39). Thus, the travelogue involves both real and imaginary journeys.

Motivations for travel varied, with the primary impetus often being religious. Travelers would set out toward the holy sites of Mecca and Medina to perform pilgrimage rituals, whether as pilgrims (hajj) or visitors (umrah). For Algerians, pilgrimage to the holy lands was a major travel motive. They journeyed to perform the religious duty, visit the Prophet's tomb, and upon returning home, they would share stories about the routes taken and the peoples encountered. Some pilgrims documented their observations to benefit others, which is known as the Hijazi travelogue.

Notable Algerian examples of this type include: *Rihla fī al-Mashriq wal-Maghrib* ("Journey in the East and West"), the preface to *Nafh al-Tib* by al-Maqrī, *Rihlat Naḥlat al-Labīb bi-Akḥbār al-Rihla ilā al-Ḥabīb*, *Rihlat Nuzhat al-Anzār fī Faḍl 'Ilm al-Tārīkh wal-Akḥbār*, and *Kitāb Faṭḥ al-Ilāh wa Mannatuhu fī al-Taḥadduth bi-Faḍl Rabbi wa Ni'matih*.

Algerians also traveled abroad to seek knowledge and meet scholars. In this regard, Ibn Khaldun famously stated in his *Muqaddima*: "Travel is necessary for the pursuit of knowledge, to gain benefits and perfection by meeting scholars and interacting with people." (Ibn Khaldun, 2001, p. 745).

Travel offered opportunities to meet scholars of diverse backgrounds and schools of thought. Ibn Khaldun emphasized that knowledge could only be attained through travel, seeking teachers, and mastering various sciences.

Narration is the most prominent feature in travel literature since travelers recount the events and experiences encountered during their journeys. Therefore, travel texts are narrative, with continuous storytelling from the start to the end of the journey. They combine elements of storytelling (narration), multiple topics covering various aspects, and blend realism with imagination in describing scenes and narrating events.

### **3. Manifestations of the Travel Discourse in the Baghdad Maqama:**

In this applied section, we attempt to highlight the features of the travel discourse in the Baghdad Maqama, starting with outlining the narrative trajectory of the journey, tracking events, descriptions, the use of the first-person pronoun, as well as the cognitive diversity which is among the most prominent characteristics of the travel genre.

#### **3-1. The Narrative Trajectory of the Journey in the Baghdad Maqama:**

The Baghdad Maqama by Al-Wahrani is among his most famous maqamat. He wrote it in Baghdad during the 6th century AH, spanning nine pages within his book entitled *Manamat Al-Wahrani wa Maqamatuh wa Rasa'iluh* ("The Dreams, Maqamat, and Letters of Al-Wahrani"). It takes the form of a dialogue between Al-Wahrani and Sheikh Abi Al-Ma'ali, discussing many issues and news related to various states such as the Almoravid and Almohad dynasties in the Maghreb, the kings of Sicily, the Fatimid state, the Alawi caliphs, and the reign of King Al-Mansur Asad al-Din Shirkuh, as well as a description of the vizier Adud al-Din.

Through this, the author attempts to narrate political and governance-related matters within a storytelling framework characterized by narration and description. This maqama embodies the travel genre within its pages, as it is a narration of events and the transmission of news and observations witnessed by the traveler during his journey to Baghdad.

Al-Wahrani outlines the narrative path of his journey to the East (Baghdad) in his words:

"When my affairs became difficult, and my west was troubled, I cast my rope toward my west, making the verses of poetry my merchandise, and the remnants of literature my sustenance. I never passed by an emir without settling in his court, nor a vizier without knocking on his door and seeking his reward (...) Winds carried me, and lands tossed me, until I neared Iraq and grew weary of separation. I headed toward the City of Peace to fulfill the pilgrimage of Islam. I entered it after enduring hardship and bitter living (...) Some lords guided me to the shop of Sheikh Abi Al-Ma'ali (...) so I went to him

and sat beside him. He said: 'First, I ask you about the state of the veiled ones and the sons of the Commander of the Faithful.' (Rukn al-Din Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Muharriz al-Wahrani, pp. 01-02)

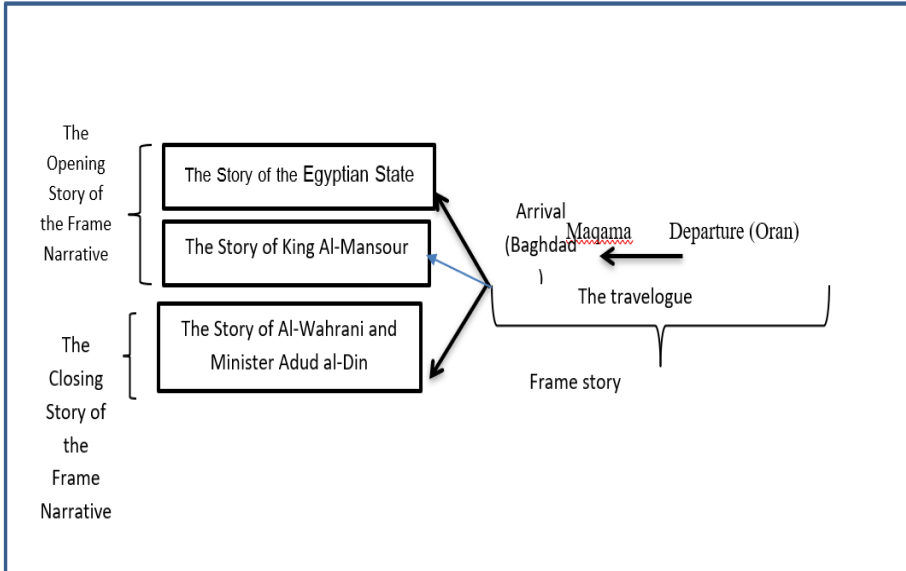
It appears that the purpose of this journey was to seek knowledge and learning, evidenced by his statement:

"I made the verses of poetry my merchandise, and the remnants of literature my sustenance."

Within this excerpt of the maqama, the author sketches the narrative path of his journey to Baghdad, explaining the reasons behind his travel, recounting the details of what he witnessed there, whom he met, and the dialogue that ensued. This dialogue is evidently cultural and historical in nature. The narrative structure of the Baghdad Maqama reveals a coherence evident in Al-Wahrani's journey from his hometown, Oran, to Baghdad, the City of Peace, and the hardships he endured to reach it after painting a model spatial setting of the city.

The events of this maqama revolve around the narrator's journey to the City of Peace after considerable hardship, aiming to accompany the virtuous and sit with scholars. Upon arriving in Baghdad, he is guided to a cultured, virtuous man named Abu Al-Ma'ali—a real historical figure—with whom he discusses conditions in the Maghreb, Egypt, Sicily, and the Ayyubid state in the Levant. These conversations serve as embedded stories within the frame story of the Baghdad Maqama (Yousef Belharma & Abdul Qader Mazari, 2022, p. 313). This is illustrated in the following figure:

### Figure1: Depicting the frame story in Al-Wahrani's Baghdad Maqama



Source: Researcher Malika Himeur

Thus, Al-Wahrani fulfilled the essential elements of the maqama: he was both the narrator and the protagonist at the same time, in addition to the use of short, rhymed phrases, and a style characterized by eloquence and grandeur. The text consists of a discourse about contemporary states and their leaders, where the shop owner asks questions and the narrator responds

#### 3-2 Description:

Description is considered one of the most important characteristics of the travelogue genre, where the traveler describes everything his eyes encounter—from landscapes and scenes in the foreign country to descriptions of sheikhs, knowledge, and scholars there. He conveys these in a descriptive scene that may be realistic or infused with his imagination. This is evident in Al-Wahrani's description of the city of peace, Baghdad:

"(...) I circled it like a seeker, and contemplated it like a critic. I saw a sea whose abundance cannot be crossed, nor can its end be seen,

and a paradise whose gardens were most exquisite, and its inhabitants enjoyed pleasure. The devout never turn away from it, nor do the righteous rise beyond its description, (like the paradise promised to the pious) (Rukn al-Din Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Muharriz al-Wahrani, p. 01)."

This descriptive passage from the maqama reflects the traveler's deep admiration for Baghdad. The view of its sea amazes onlookers, and its fields, orchards, rivers, and palm trees are among the greatest signs of God's creation—it is truly a paradise on earth. The traveler transmits this scene with such precision and detail that you feel as if you are witnessing it firsthand. This also appears in his description of the city of Oran, when the sheikh asked him about the land he came from:

" I said: from the farthest West and an uncountable distance, from the land where the sun does not reach until its orbits grow weary, and its possessions become noisy; nor the moon until its saddle is torn, and its constellations collapse; nor the winds until their steps shrink and their footprints fade." (Rukn al-Din Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Muharriz al-Wahrani, p. 02)

In this passage, we notice the precision and skill in description through the use of natural elements. The author excelled in describing his homeland, portraying it as distant and employing his creative imagination to make the listener live those wonderful imaginary moments and enchanting scenes that paint the image of his country. The traveler goes beyond describing places to describing personalities, scholars, and literati, such as his description of Sheikh Abi Al-Ma'ali: "He is the garden of literature, and the archive of the Arabs; he returns to correct opinion, and excels in every branch of knowledge." (Rukn al-Din Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Muharriz al-Wahrani, p. 02)

This descriptive passage introduces us to a distinguished figure in Baghdad, the literary scholar Abi Al-Ma'ali, who possesses broad literary culture as well as mastery of all sciences. The traveler described him as the garden of literature and the archive of the Arabs, which is a fitting description for his stature. He also described the virtuous qualities of King Al-Nasir, saying:

"(...) due to the admirable traits he was endowed with, his preference for justice and fairness, the combination of kingly morals

and the humility of the commoner, and what he was granted of noble generosity, magnanimity, and intelligence (Rukn al-Din Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Muharriz al-Wahrani, p. 05)."

This descriptive passage provides the reader with a clear image of King Al-Nasir's character, combining the admirable traits cherished in Islamic teachings such as justice and beautiful morals. The traveler expressed this by attributing these good qualities to the described personality, which helps to categorize this maqama within the travel genre.

### **3-3 Speaking in the First Person:**

The travelogue discourse relies on the first-person pronoun and recording the events of the journey. Thus, we find the traveler's "I" frequently present throughout the journey. Since this maqama was written by Al-Wahrani himself, he is both the narrator and the protagonist, and the speaker at the same time. This is clearly evident through the pronoun used to tell the events of this maqama/journey, which is the first-person singular "I," appearing in various forms here, such as the first-person "tā'" (past tense marker), the first-person "yā'" (suffix), and the present tense verb forms indicating the speaker. Various forms of the individual "I" appear in the traveler's speech to Sheikh Abi Al-Ma'ali: "I said to him: Tell me about the life of the Imam these days, for I am going to a people who truly believe in his Imamate (Rukn al-Din Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Muharriz al-Wahrani, p. 07)."

The individual "I" appears in words like (I said, tell me, I am going), indicating that the traveler's self is the main character in the journey/maqama. Al-Wahrani is both the narrator and protagonist of the maqama and the traveler on his journey from Oran to Baghdad, which indicates the realism and authenticity of the journey since the writing self actually undertook the journey. As the saying goes, the informant is not like the eyewitness. This is evident in Al-Wahrani's speech to Sheikh Abi Al-Ma'ali regarding the minister Adud al-Din: "I said to him: What do you say about the opening of his door and the pouring of his clouds? He said: By God, if you had approached the minister's door, he would have showered you with his abundant blessing, so that you would not reach your homeland, would disdain your power, and despise those princes you met and the ministers you

saw. I said to him: Then, by God, I thank him as the earth thanks the sky and the blossoming meadow thanks the water, especially if he gives me from the caliph a magnificent noble robe, I will light myself by borrowing from it and bless myself with its garment, and spread it on the lighthouse of Alexandria and cast it on the shore of the sea (...) (Rukn al-Din Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Muharriz al-Wahrani, p. 08)."

In this passage, the speaking self assumes various forms, such as the first-person "tā'," the second-person suffix addressing the self (traveler), in addition to the implicit second-person pronoun within the verb "you saw." The present tense verbs indicating the speaker (I light, I spread, I cast) demonstrate the dominance of the traveler's self in the speech form, which gives the maqama the characteristics of the travel genre.

### **3-4 Cognitive Diversity:**

The travelogue is distinguished from other literary genres by being a vast space for cognitive diversity. Travels are "rich sources for various sciences, and collectively they form a true record of different aspects of life and the concepts of its people throughout the ages. The traveler, while covering the earth during his journey, simultaneously observes various life phenomena he sees or sometimes hears about and transmits them in his journey (Hosni Mahmoud Hussein, 1983, p. 06)."

This is evident in Al-Wahrani's journey to Baghdad, which was rich with knowledge, especially political and historical. We sense such information in some examples like his description of Abd al-Mu'min ibn Ali, the ruler of the Almohad state: "I said: Supported by heaven, dominant over those above the water. The crowned bowed to him, and humans and jinn served him. If the pen had a tongue and the paper a person, they would have ached and complained." (Rukn al-Din Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Muharriz al-Wahrani, pp. 02-03)

Within this descriptive scene, the traveler conveys a cognitive value by introducing the character of Abd al-Mu'min ibn Ali, ruler of the Almohads in Morocco. His description combines praise and harsh criticism, noting his cruelty and severe oppression.

Historical knowledge is also clearly evident when the sheikh asked the traveler about the Fatimid state (Egyptian) and how it was taken from its owners. He said: "(...) I said to him: Know that when God's time came for them, He exposed their disgrace and cast their power among them. Zayd struck Umar, Khalid killed Bakr, the sword's scabbard broke, and it was sheathed in winter and summer. Their corruption did not clear away until their lions perished, and their obstinacy did not cease until their troops scattered. The bonds of the state weakened, and its men failed to control it. It remained like a beautiful maiden whom men exposed and surrendered to others (...) And the Franks preceded them, turning it into a chessboard (Rukn al-Din Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Muharriz al-Wahrani, p. 04)."

This passage blends stylistic beauty with brevity and eloquence, carrying tragic events that express the neglect and failure of the Fatimid rulers to support their state, resulting in its conquest by the Franks who turned it into a swamp corrupted by the hands of the oppressors—a historical truth derived from this passage of the maqama, which reflects the features of the travel genre and represents it perfectly.

#### **4. In conclusion:**

The Baghdad Maqama by Ibn Muharriz Al-Wahrani reflects the intermingling and genre blending between the maqama and travel genres, where the characteristics of both arts appear so clearly that it is difficult to separate them. The following results can be summarized:

- The predominance of rhymed prose and short phrases in Al-Wahrani's style, which gives the maqama its specificity as a literary genre.
- The narrator and the protagonist in this maqama are the same.
- The Baghdad maqama lacks the trickery and cunning typical of other maqamas but has a strong presence of narration and description, in addition to being rich in historical and political knowledge related to some Arab countries such as Morocco, Sicily, and Egypt, which makes it closer to the travel genre than to the maqama genre.
- The characteristics of the travel genre appear clearly in the Baghdad maqama, including narration, description, speaking in the first-person singular, and the cognitive diversity that marks travel writing, similar to other literary genres.

- The Baghdad maqama is written in a maqama style but its subject is the journey from Oran to Baghdad, with a clear beginning and end, including many stories embedded in the framing story (maqama).
- Al-Wahrani succeeded in employing the travel art in the Baghdad maqama, showing this intergenre blending based on the features of each art.

The Baghdad Maqama by Ibn Muharriz Al-Wahrani remains an open field for various studies and critical approaches that can explore its depths and open new horizons in academic research.

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