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# Narrative Opening as an Argumentative Strategy in Al-Wahrani's Literature

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## Abstract

This study examines one of the most important tools for constructing argumentative discourse in the work of Rukn al-Din ibn Muhariz al-Wahrani, namely "narration." Al-Wahrani employed narration as a functional element for disseminating his views and persuading his readers of his comprehensive reform project, through which he sought to address the various manifestations of corruption that prevailed during the Ayyubid era.

By focusing on the narrative opening, as the first building block and cornerstone of narrative architecture, the study seeks to clarify its role in shaping and consolidating narrative discourse. It also aims to demonstrate the role it plays in attracting the recipient's attention to the underlying issues embedded in the discourse, and, on the other hand, to reveal the argumentative techniques and means contained in Al-Wahrani's openings for leading his recipient to accept his views and become convinced of his reform project.

*Keywords: narration, opening, discourse, argumentation, Al-Wahrani.*

## Introduction

It is hardly possible for anyone examining Al-Wahrani's literature to overlook the pervasive presence of narration in all its elements. This has led us to identify a discourse whose components are integrated and whose structure is coherent: no element negates what precedes it; rather, each element justifies the preceding one, explains its idea, and completes it. This is evident to the discerning reader when examining several levels—stylistic, semantic, lexical, and syntactic—in Al-Wahrani's discourse, both formally and substantively. Herein lies the function and essence of narration, for it is the spirit inhabiting discourse and granting it the legitimacy of existence (Al-Ruwaili & Al-Bazaghi, 2000, p. 105).

The legitimacy of existence and the life-giving spirit that narration lends to discourse necessarily direct us toward understanding the relationship between narration and argumentation. If narration is the spirit that inhabits discourse and gives it legitimacy, then there can be no discourse without argumentation, and no argumentation without discourse (Taha Abd al-Rahman, 1998, p. 213).

Accordingly, we may state that Al-Wahrani's discourse is quintessentially narrative and argumentative. Narration and argumentation operate within it in an interdependent relationship.

The structure and formation of the discourse reveal the worlds of narration, its gradations, characters, times, and places, all of which draw the recipient into the narrative world, oblige him to engage with its opinions and representations, and persuade him of its ideas. Thus, the narrator exerts both logical and aesthetic influence, and, smoothly, affects the recipient through the ideas he carries and defends: "Narration is not merely a neutral presentation of facts; rather, it is a tool for persuading the audience of a particular point of view through techniques such as selecting and arranging events and using emotionally charged language" (Herman, 2024, p. 177).

As a narrator pursuing a goal that he sought to achieve by persuading the reader of his opinions and ideas, Al-Wahrani resorted to the means of narration and the aesthetic qualities it generates—qualities capable of touching emotions, winning over hearts, and gaining sympathy. We shall examine the opening and its argumentative role in Al-Wahrani's narrative discourse in order to clarify its function in persuading the recipient either to accept or reject an idea, given its importance within every discourse and textual formation. It is the first building block and the cornerstone from which every discourse begins. Ibn Rashīq al-Qayrawani describes it as "the first thing that strikes the ear" (Ibn Rashīq al-Qayrawani, 2001, p. 389), just as the title and opening line are in poetry. Hence, writers and poets have devoted particular attention to it, and critics have endorsed its importance since ancient times.

Ibn Rashīq confirms that "a good opening is a cause of delight and a vehicle for success" (Ibn Rashīq al-Qayrawani, 2001, p. 217). The opening is thus a window through which we look into the inner dimensions of discourse and ascend toward its profound worlds within the body of the text. It is a link between the reader and the narrative work or discourse: when it is well constructed and appropriately positioned, it facilitates entry into the depths of the text; when it is poorly constructed, it may discourage the reader from continuing. If the narrative opening is a concise summary that introduces and frames the discourse without requiring lengthy preliminaries, its task is to capture the reader's attention from the very first moment and exert an initial pressure of influence upon him from the first contact between reader and discourse.

For this reason, we have chosen to examine the opening while emphasizing that it is one of the components that organize and frame discourse, contribute to producing a coherent textual fabric, and participate in the achievement of its purposes. None of these components should be overlooked, nor should their importance and effectiveness in shaping discourse and realizing its objectives be underestimated.

It is therefore unsurprising that we selected the opening as the first of these components, since "the narrative opening (Exorde) is expected to prepare for the subsequent argumentative stage" (Barthes, 1985, p. 152). The narrative opening paves the way for the remaining discursive components and presents, in a concise form, a brief idea of the depth of the discourse and its central argument. It consequently bears the burden of influencing and exerting pressure upon the recipient.

It is a cumulative concentration of issues and opinions presented and elaborated within the discourse. This is what we seek to explore in this section by examining its argumentative dimensions.

Narration branches into several genres, and our author rode the crest of these genres without hesitation. The first genre through which he achieved his distinctiveness, as attested by the writers and critics of his time and those who followed, was the dream narrative, known as the "Great Dream." Its meaning is contained in its name: what a sleeper sees in a dream. It is a narrative practice that frees the writer from the constraints of ordinary narration, allowing him to rebel against the limitations of time and space, transcend the horizon of expectation, disrupt linguistic conventionality, and move beyond exhausted narrative practices, while avoiding accountability for what he presents. There is no executioner for a dream, no guards to restrain it, and no rules to limit its flow or momentum as it presents its ideas and defends the position it adopts.

Persuasion is the goal of every discourse, and the procedural mechanisms employed by the narrator serve only to attract the recipient and achieve the purposes of the discourse, whether explicit or implicit. In order to capture the heart, stimulate curiosity, revive interpretation, and sustain attention, our author devoted exceptional care to the opening of the dream narrative, introducing it with a poetic triplet:

*O fragrance that brought me a greeting,  
May the scent of Umm Salim sleep upon it.  
It passed through the arak trees of the two valleys,  
awakening every intoxicated one with languid shoulders.  
Indeed, I tell, through my tears and longing,  
the weeping of the calamities and the lamentation of the doves.*  
(Al-Wahrani, n.d., p. 17)

Al-Wahrani deliberately introduced poetry, a literary genre distinct from narration, from the very outset of the discourse. He opened the dream narrative with it, and we can clearly sense his persistent effort to envelop the recipient and capture his attention. His persuasive project becomes evident as he addresses an Arabic ear attuned to music and captivated by rhythm and meter, together with all the inherited artistic characteristics embedded in the consciousness of the narrator's contemporaries toward this cherished literary heritage. The verses are composed in a meter that evokes an atmosphere of joy and overwhelming happiness at receiving a letter from his learned shaykh, a reply to a letter that our author had previously sent to him.

Following the verses, Al-Wahrani praised his shaykh with every admirable and beloved quality: "My venerable master, the eminent Imam, the memorizer, the eloquent and trustworthy" (Al-Wahrani, n.d., p. 17). We see before us a highly ceremonial discourse that attributes every virtue to him and then describes the narrator's longing for him with the yearning of one deeply enamored, humbling himself by calling himself a servant. At this point, the recipient may imagine that he is facing a royal epistle overflowing with glorification and veneration, its fabric tightly woven and its language lavishly beautiful—until the hidden resentment and concealed rancor in the heart of its author emerge. He is actually reproaching and holding his addressee

accountable, demanding that Al-Wahrani preserve his rank and reputation; the response overwhelmed him and deprived him of sleep.

From this point, Al-Wahrani unsheathed the sword of his pen. He stood against every degrading and shameful act he witnessed and lay in wait for all its perpetrators. Thus the dream narrative was born for the first time in his hands, although the idea itself had precedents. He named it the "dream" because it broke away from ready-made forms, opening with a peaceful poetic prelude and elevated language.

Once he had reassured the recipient by presenting him with the beauty of his language and his mastery of prosody, he once again led him to believe in another beginning by saying: "Then his eye overcame him, and he saw in his sleep what a sleeper sees" (Al-Wahrani, n.d., p. 23). We thus encounter a second opening. The writer who rebelled against literary genres also rebels against the conventions and hierarchy of narrative discourse by placing two openings where there would normally be one.

The first is aesthetic, touching souls and minds; the second is strange and uncanny, provoking sensitivity and generating astonishment. Both serve as a prelude to completing the text to its end because of their power to influence and envelop the recipient. Through the second opening, Al-Wahrani escaped the constraints of surveillance and accountability and felt secure behind the cloak of an imaginary dream. He could therefore bring forth every flaw and evil that he had seen or experienced, exposing manifestations of deception, corruption, and injustice. He spoke of what was otherwise left unspoken, fearing neither prince nor minister nor their associates, nor even an imam or a scribe. All were placed under the mercy of his pen in a dream in which the Day of Judgment had seemingly arisen and all people stood equal before divine justice, without a veil. It was an opportunity to criticize society in all its groups and classes and their actions, while also entering an eschatological world populated by angels and prophets.

It is therefore noticeable that the two openings display remarkable artistry, in addition to their power to influence, attract, and persuade others. They were appropriate to the subject and served it effectively. In the first, he expressed his delight at receiving a response for which he had long yearned and waited, intending it to be pleasant and uplifting to his spirit. The second, however, was a pretext that permitted him to address everything that troubled him through a satirical, mocking, and highly revealing style, including abuse and invective. Its ultimate aim is not immediately explicit; rather, the recipient recognizes and understands its purposes in the face of Al-Wahrani's unrestricted narrative flow, free from all concern for ranks and social positions. This was, in his view, the most appropriate means for achieving his reformist objective: a comprehensive social, moral, and political reform.

### **Maqamat (Rhymed Prose Narratives)**

Al-Wahrani mastered the art of the *maqama*, an ancient genre that had been practiced before him by Al-Hamadhani, Al-Hariri, and others. Our author gave the genre his distinctive touch through the nature of his openings, using them as a vehicle for breaking monotony, dispelling

boredom, and attracting attention. Researchers have regarded him as “one of the most prominent contributors to the art of maqamat and manamat in Algeria” (Saadallah, 1981, p. 216). We find him attempting, from one maqama to another, to address different subjects. In several passages, he employs diverse openings, concentrating his efforts on their beginnings so that he can convey his narrative discourse smoothly, together with the objectives and purposes that he seeks to persuade others to accept, despite the diversity of his themes.

Perhaps our author realized that the interpretation of his discourse and the recipient’s response to it depended upon the extent to which he renewed his narrative discourse, first capturing the recipient at the threshold of the discourse and then winning him over. This is what draws the recipient toward the depths of the text, where the depth of the ideas and visions lies—ideas and visions that the writer seeks to make persuasive.

Thus, in the Baghdad Maqama, he begins with the words of Al-Wahrani: “When my aims became unattainable and my circumstances grew troubled, I made the goods of poetry my merchandise and the ethics of literature my merchandise” (Saadallah, 1981, p. 121). The narrator makes himself the narrator of this maqama, perhaps marking a genuine beginning toward a persuasive narrative project. The self tends to accept and trust interaction with a narrator whom it knows and to believe the events and reports conveyed through his narrative course, whereas introducing an imagined intermediary narrator may undermine confidence in the truth of what any writer reports. This is consistent with what Hamid Lahmidani states: “The principle governing the relationship between narrator and reader is the principle of trust, because the reader initially tends toward confidence in the narrator’s narration” (Lahmidani, n.d., p. 45).

Al-Wahrani intelligently attributes the entire narrative flow to himself and thus assumes responsibility for the events and the general framework of the maqama. In this way, he gains the reader’s trust and repairs any potential crack that might generate doubt in the minds of his recipients, enabling him to exert influence through the ideas and visions he plants at the entrance to their fertile field. His discourse thus delights the eye and captivates hearts from the first encounter.

Moreover, the dominance of the first-person pronoun in the opening—*māāribī*, *maghāribī*, *ghāribī*—and its reference to the narrator Al-Wahrani renews the recipient’s confidence and instills within him a greater sense of influence, drawing him with the narrator into the depth of the narrative and the depth of the maqama, with all the visions and orientations it may contain. What becomes particularly clear to the researcher of Al-Wahrani’s literature, and specifically of the Baghdad Maqama, is the predominance and succession of past-tense verbs. This is not limited to the opening but characterizes the maqama as a whole. In the opening, for example, we find “said,” “I made,” “became unattainable,” and “grew troubled.” These verbs indicate a past time of the event and transfer us, as recipients and examiners of Al-Wahrani’s discourse, to a time different from that of the maqama—a time preceding it. The truth of that time can be tested through the events within the maqama, and its reality can be accepted because it is presented as something that actually occurred, especially since its author is known: the narrator Al-Wahrani. This contributes to complete acceptance and persuasion regarding the discourse’s

content and establishes the recipient's full confidence in the discourse before entering the depth of the maqama itself.

All that we have mentioned is directed toward rational persuasion and toward producing logical assent in the recipient. However, it is important to point out another dimension employed by Al-Wahrani throughout his discourse, and particularly in the opening of this maqama: emotional influence and the aesthetic dimension, which are strikingly employed and to which hearts respond voluntarily. As we see in the accompanying example, the writer seeks to delight his recipient through his command of language and his musical ear. He does not merely employ rhymed prose; rather, he makes the recipient anticipate what he will say in the next cadence, thereby achieving the function of influence and persuasion naturally, drawing the recipient into his text and compelling him to interact with the sound and variety of its rhymes, avoiding boredom and the slightest monotony: "When my aims became unattainable and my circumstances grew troubled... I made the goods of poetry my merchandise and the ethics of literature my nourishment" (Al-Wahrani, n.d., p. 1).

Here his variation of cadences and his use of paronomasia become clearly apparent, adding aesthetic dimensions to his opening, touching the hearts of his recipients and captivating their minds. Thus, he logically and aesthetically surrounds his readers, leading them to penetrate the maqama to its end and become convinced of its purposes.

Here lies the argumentative role of the opening in its harmony with the content. After placing us within a coherent argumentative framework, as we have seen, characterized by a single direction in which the narrator is the sole speaking pole, he gradually enters the content by introducing the character of Abu al-Ma'ali. Through this character, he sought to establish his identity and display his abilities, and then to expose the corrupt social conditions and manifestations that prevailed in his time, with the intention of addressing and reforming them in an engaging style.

The same pattern appears in his Sicilian Maqama, where he again attributed it to himself and served as its narrator. He made extensive use of past-tense verbs, rhymed prose, paronomasia, and varied cadences, as in his statement: "I entered Sicily in the passing days and found it a gathering-place of descriptions, along the path of fairness" (Al-Wahrani, n.d., p. 219). Add to this his journey of revelation and exposure in the cities. The strength of this opening represents an initial force and an artistic skill that frames the discourse, delineates its dimensions, and ensures the vitality of the narrative activity by enticing the addressee and engaging him from the first moment of the discourse, drawing him toward its continuation and persuading him of its content.

In addition to the Baghdad and Sicilian maqamat, Al-Wahrani composed the Damascus Maqama, or the Maqama of Shams al-Khilafa. Its opening reveals "imitation," for he modeled it on the maqamat of Al-Hamadhani and Al-Hariri by resorting to an invented narrator-hero such as Isa ibn Hisham and Abu al-Fath al-Iskandari, fictional narrators created by the imagination of

the authors of the maqamat, and for reasons connected with the art of the maqama (Ibrahim, 1992, pp. 196–197).

The distinctive character here is Isa ibn Hammad al-Siqilli, whom he entrusted with the responsibility for his discourse and to whom he attributed the sequence of events in the maqama from its opening: “Isa ibn Hammad related to us; he said” (Al-Wahrani, n.d., p. 97). This is a different name invented by Al-Wahrani to transmit his discourse; its only known indication is its association with Sicily. The events further reveal aspects of its foreignness, since “isnad is a literary effect whereby a person is attributed to another person who has no actual existence, thereby giving him an entity expressive of an internal reality” (Thabit, n.d., p. 45). This narrator derives his existence from the events and adventures he narrates; through the discourse, his features, orientations, and purposes become defined.

Accordingly, at the opening of the Damascus Maqama, the writer places us before a fictional character that stimulates curiosity. What we do not know naturally arouses our desire to know, requiring us to remain with the discourse and seek its core in order to understand this character and what he seeks to accomplish. Especially since our author attributes the entire discourse to him, saying “he said” and “he related to us,” there is no way to verify this character’s reports except by pursuing his story through continued reading. This is an intelligent device that guarantees the reader’s continued attention and eagerness to satisfy his curiosity. What is fictional becomes real and its image is formed through narrative perception. When the addresser succeeds in harmonizing the openings of texts with their contents and purposes, the fictional and the real merge.

Our author also deliberately specifies a real geographical location, one that resonates with him and reinforces his sense of belonging. Identifying a familiar place has an effect on the recipient and completes the narrative thread, blending the fictional character Isa ibn Hammad with the real place of Sicily. This brings us closer to realism and to accepting the credibility of what appears from the outset, just as events do. Places and events are among the narrative components that introduce us to the writer’s world, leading us to accept his characters and reports.

Past temporal markers also transport us from our present time to the writer’s time—the time of the maqama and its narration. He says: “When Islam became weak in Sicily and the religion of Muhammad, peace be upon him, declined there... I migrated to Syria with my family and made Damascus the destination of my journey” (Al-Wahrani, n.d., p. 97). These are all past-tense verbs—became weak, declined, migrated, made—which place the recipient in a position of trust and acceptance of what he reads and transport him to the time of the events, a time different from that of the narrator Isa ibn Hisham himself; rather, they are beginnings that had occurred before.

It is also evident that language is used in a striking manner through paronomasia and varied forms of rhymed prose, giving the openings aesthetic qualities and adding vitality and fluidity to the narration, ensuring an uninterrupted narrative rich in detail and capable of conveying its purposes to the recipient without affectation or heaviness.

We found Al-Wahrani's intensive efforts embedded throughout the narrative—in place, time, events, and characters—from the opening of his maqama. These elements instill in his recipients a sense of assent and acceptance of his propositions, especially since in the Damascus Maqama he addressed the human condition, criticized the circumstances of his society and those who controlled its affairs, and directed his sharp tongue toward scholars and jurists, calling them pretentious jurists who possessed none of the knowledge or jurisprudence they claimed. He did so in a humorous, satirical, and revealing style, avoiding direct blame by attributing his statements to an adventurous narrator whom he called "Isa ibn Hammad al-Siqilli."

As for the Mosque Maqama, or what appears under the title "A Copy on the Tongue of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus" (Al-Wahrani, n.d., p. 61), scholars have differed over the determination of its genre: is it an epistle or a maqama? Since our concern here is the study of openings and the demonstration of their argumentative function, its beginning is unquestionably the opening of a maqama.

It begins: "A certain knower said, in the manner of one who speaks through assumed speech." We observe our author's withdrawal from the role of narrator at the beginning of his speech when he uses the verb "said," yet he does not attribute the statement to any specific person, even an imagined one; rather, he leaves it open and entrusts it to a group of "knowers." This opening is characterized by its ability to provoke astonishment, as it omits names and conceals the identity behind the expression "certain knowers." Its language remains radiant and luminous through rhetorical embellishments such as paronomasia, antithesis, and rhymed prose, whose cadences recur in varied forms until the end of the maqama, as in: "The door of justice was shaken and closed; the Book of God was cast aside and forgotten; the mosques fled to the Great Mosque of Damascus" (Al-Wahrani, n.d., p. 61).

Its language is brilliant in the strength of its vocabulary and the resonance of its rhymes, all of which captivate the listener's ear and propel the recipient toward penetrating the depth of the narrative without fatigue. It whets his appetite for narration so that he completes its cadences in interaction with the discourse and experiences in his present the events of a past that the author had carefully evoked in the opening through verbs such as "was shaken," "was closed," "was cast aside," "was forgotten," and "fled." The reader thus moves voluntarily across times, using the vessel of an engaging narrative, only to find himself before a protagonist who has been given a voice and to whom grievances and complaints are raised because of his status and significance. The oppressed come to him from persecuted mosques in the presence of a greater one such as the Mosque of Damascus.

Before these masks and the personification of an inanimate entity within a defined spatial setting—Damascus—the reader realizes at the moment of narration that the subject is larger than the mosques themselves: it concerns the ruling authority, the people, injustice, and oppression between ruler and subjects. The mask serves only to create illusion and concealment out of fear of punishment. The harshness of the discourse, its criticism, and its denunciation within this narrative edifice expose the falsity of their actions and attack their social ranks and

offices that are not occupied by those who deserve them, with the aim of achieving profound political and social reform.

### Conclusion

After this research journey, we may conclude that Al-Wahrani's argumentative discourse combines depth of vision with the manner of presenting it—that is, it brings together the logical and the aesthetic. Narration frames this discourse and contributes to the generation and reinforcement of its persuasive value, while also giving an aesthetic dimension to the openings of his discourses. His openings therefore assume both a rational and an aesthetic character in order to achieve persuasive and pleasurable purposes through the mutual reinforcement of argumentation and narration.

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