

THE IMAGE OF THE COUNTRYSIDE IN THE MODERN SYRIAN NOVEL

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One of the specific features of the modern literary process in the Arab countries consists in that - taking into consideration its constant artistic and thematic renewal - the interest of fiction writers towards the "rural" theme is not abating. Writers do find in it the inexhaustible abundance of human characters, a vast range of situations and conflicts as well as the ethical set of problems of intransigent significance.

One may find a lot of common traits between the modern "rural" Syrian fiction, so far as its aesthetic purpose and orientation to particular problems are concerned, and the literary work of writers of a number of Eastern literatures, which is a natural phenomenon. To a great extent, this is being determined by the typological closeness of the processes of literary development, by the active interaction of different artistic systems, as well as by the similarity of historical development, and, at last, by the common logic of life itself, the latter, however, being treated and reproduced in the best of masterpieces with originality and individual uniqueness. Therefore, the examination of the "rural" theme in the Syrian novel seems topical in the context of the literary traditions nurturing it.

A substantial role in the artistic process pertains to traditions. The attention paid thereto in literary research works is completely justified. Articles as well as collective monographs¹ are being published, discussions and congresses take place², being dedicated to different problems of the folklore and classic heritage, the literary traditions. In the works of the orientalists from different countries the rationalization of traditions gathers momentum as a live process of perception and creative remodelling by writers of those aesthetic achievements of the past which correspond to the greatest extent to their individual features as well as to immanent goals of literature. As Hilary Kilpatrick writes, "literary tradition is not static, but is continuously being added to by each new generation of writers" (Kilpatrick 1995: 150).

It should be noted that the range of modern interpretations of the notion "literary tradition" is broad, it extends from establishing the closeness of aesthetic positions to finding parallels discovering harmony, registering similar images, situations, words, seeking ready models for the works researched.

¹ See, e.g. *Chudogestvenni traditsii literatur Vostoka i sovremennost: traditsionalizm na sovremennom etape*, Moscow 1986.

² See, e.g. *Proceedings of the 14th Congress of the Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants*, Budapest 1995.

For the purpose of specifying the conceptual apparatus we distinguish tradition in the broad sense of the word (or general literary tradition) - a complex of ideal and artistic values accumulated by mankind and used by subsequent generations - and concrete or particular literary tradition, which is predominantly style-oriented, if by style the aesthetic integrity of the meaningful form is understood.

In other words, the monotype of cognition by images and the proximity of artistic structure linked thereto allow us to speak about the presence of a concrete literary tradition in different works of Syrian writers.

It is not only the tradition of European cultures and classical heritage par excellence, but the achievements of modern Egyptian writers as well, that are deemed fruitful for the development of 20th century Syrian literature, as well as other literatures of the Arab region. Among a multitude of brilliant talents and creative individualities who investigate the rural theme in multiple dimensions, we shall mention only ʿAbdarrahmān aš-Šarqāwī and Yūsuf Idrīs, whose traditions are reflected more conspicuously in the work of a number of Syrian writers. The works of these fiction writers, quite unlike each other, are specific, they reflect different aspects of Egyptian reality, simultaneously complement one another, enriching the common experience of Arab literature, its content of problems and themes, its arsenal of artistic pictorial means.

It is remarkable that the artistic and aesthetic search of Egyptian writers finds resonance in the works of the League of Syrian writers, founded in 1951 in Damascus. In 1954, at its regular conference, it was transformed into the League of Arab writers³.

Thanks to the creative work of the League's members, the story genre obtains a key position in the artistic process. They publish their works on the pages of the magazines "*al-Adīb*", "*al-Ādāb*", "*aṭ-Taqāfa al-waṭaniyya*", in 1952 by means of their combined efforts they published a collection of stories "*Darb ilā l-qimma*" (The Road to the Top), where, for the first time in the history of national literature, the realities of the Syrian countryside became one of the dominating themes.

Mawāhib al-Kayyālī, one of the promoters of the League's creation dedicates many stories of the collection "*al-Manādīl al-bīḍ*" (The White Kerchief, 1954) to the rural theme. Depicting the social structure and way of life of a Syrian village, the situation of small tenant-farmers, the author addresses the problem of migration of landless peasantry. Thus, in the story "Hero" he narrates about the life experience of a young peasant Aḥmad who is forced to leave the nurturing land and become an actor in the city. In search of employment, the heroine of Liyān Dayrānī, the widow Umm Nazār, goes to Damascus, "never thinking that one day life's turmoil

³ Writers of some Arab countries participate in this conference, among them Yūsuf Idrīs, representing Egypt.

would throw her out in city where she would have to fight desperately with poverty" (Dayrānī 1976: 31). Šamīm aš-Šarīf, who received recognition subsequently as an art critic and a great connoisseur of European classical music, wrote novels which distinguish themselves by blunt axiology and emotionality of the author's narrative. In the centre of his collection of stories "*Anīn al-ard*" (The Earth's Groaning, 1954) is the theme of the "little man", shown by the author not only as an individual careworn and deprived of rights, but also as a man capable to raise protest, similarly to the heroes of 'Abdarrahmān aš-Šarqāwī. But in elaborating the characters, the author often lacks the everyday life and psychological precision of detail inherent to the best of Yūsuf Idrīs' stories.

It should be noted that in many works of the 50's, the main accent is laid upon the social and critical purpose, upon the diversity of national life in its contrasts and contradictions, without a deep psychological motivation of deeds and characters.

The writers in their artistic analysis of the world and man turn towards the experience of other literatures. They not only try to assimilate their achievements but through practical activity they help Syrians join the spiritual treasures of other nations.

As Šamīm aš-Šarīf recollects in a conversation with the author of these lines, after the creation of the League literary life in Syria invigorates. In clubs, among young people, discussions take place and lectures are read, dedicated to the problems of the national culture's development, to the creative work of renowned Egyptian and European writers. Model works of fiction are translated, representing different trends, tendencies and schools. Huṣām al-Ḥaṭīb remarks that in "the mid 50's, translation activity reached such heights that all the history of Syrian culture did not yet know" (al-Ḥaṭīb 1972: 46).

The expansion of contacts with European and Egyptian literature, the latter being the closest, is one of the indices showing the intensification of the literary process in the country. These contacts influence propitiously the creative work as well as the creative practice of different generations of Syrian writers.

Konrad writes: "Our time is an epoch of national literatures, but, together with this, it is an epoch of literary communities" (Konrad 1978: 32). These words may be a sui generis symbol of the artistic process in Syria in the decades to come, although interaction is one of the most important principles of national literature's existence and development at all stages. Syrian literature reaches new frontiers in the process of active contact with other systems of art.

Some most general signs of innovation are the exploitation of new themes, and the striving to penetrate into the essence of the national character, the formulation of problems and ideas concordant with the spiritual life of society, the enrichment of an ethical and humanitarian set of problems, the renovation of artistic forms, the creation of necessary narrative structures and the rise of other genre modifications, the perfection of composition methods, the enlargement of the range of individual

styles - and, as a stimulus for all these transformations - the strengthening of links with contemporaneity.

The aspiration of Syrian writers towards thoroughness and multilaterality of perception of the world manifests itself in all literary genres. But it obtains the greatest momentum in the ideas and images of epic narration.

The status of the novel in the general system of literary genres changes. The intensive development in the precedent decades contributes for the novel's confirmation as a leading genre of Syrian literature till the present. Synthesizing the positive experience of all problem-centred and theoretical schools and varieties, genre and style trends, the modern national novel becomes the index showing the level of literary development reached. A characteristic feature of the Syrian novel at the new stage is the absorption, intensive as never before, of contemporaneous themes and topics.

The rural theme, traditional for Arab literature, receives new filling and rationalization now not only in light prosaic forms but in the epic narrative as well, reflecting those essential problems of national progress which until then were not set out in the national literature, and with such a force and intensity at that.

A number of objective reasons, including difficulty to obtain access to literary sources, determine our interest in regard to just a few, but in a certain sense quite representative, novels of Syrian writers, each of them having found his own standpoint of the embodiment of a given theme, and his own style.

One of the first among the novelists to follow the rural theme is Haydar Haydar, which he does in his work "*al-Fahd*" (The Cheetah, 1968)⁴. In a small book as a volume, the author narrates the history of the life of a mountain village Bu'ālī, covering the period before and after the achievement of national independence. The ordinary Šāhīn, quite inconspicuous among other peasants, who however turns out to be ready for decisive acts; becomes the main protagonist. It is to him that the author entrusts the presentation of a lot of his ideas. The time comes for the peasants to pay a tithe. Šāhīn refuses to pay, chases away the tax-collector, and, as a result, is imprisoned. Killing two guards, the hero flees to the mountains. However, he does not evade the death penalty. The depiction of Šāhīn's tragic fate commingles in the narrative with the accusation of the feudal arbitrariness and the description of the growing popular discontent.

The process of restructuring the patriarchal standpoint of view, the melting of the peasant character formed during the centuries, are investigated by Nabīl Sulaymān in the novel "*Yandāḥ at-tūfān*" (The Flood Will Ebb Away, 1970). The book's action extends during the post-revolutionary period, when the heroes already do not face

⁴ This work was first published in the collection *Hikāyāt an-Nawrus al-muhāğir* in 1968. In 1977 a separate edition was published.

the problem of "choosing the way" as the situation was in "*al-Fahd*". Here the author strives to rationalize the results of the choice made, and of the ensuing reforms, depicting the fighting and the mores of one of the villages in the province al-Lādīqiyya. If in the book "*al-Fahd*" the main plot line is connected with the life story of one particular hero, and the author is more interested in the different stages of the development of this personality, the attention of Nabīl Sulaymān concentrates mainly upon the diversity of his heroes' fates. Painting the generalized image of a Syrian village, he shows its deep social stratification.

Similarly to the Egyptian writer Yūsuf Idrīs in the book "*al-Ḥarām*" (Sin, 1959), Fāris Zarzūr in his novel "*al-Ḥufāḥ wa-ḥuffay Ḥunayn*" (The Barefoot and the Shoes Hunayn, 1971)⁵ addresses the life of agricultural season workers driven by hunger and unemployment to seek employment in the other end of the country. However, given the identity of the material chosen for description, given the specific similarity of topics, the writers solve in their own specific manner the artistic tasks set before them.

If the book of Idrīs "contains not a single word about the social strife in the village - the work is based on the principle of everyday life drama" (Kirpichenko 1980: 88), the novel of the Syrian writer is transfixed by the pathos of the rejection of social injustice. Its plot, briefly speaking, comes down to the following. The season workers, nurturing radiant hopes, gather to undertake a long travel. Then the acute problem of the transportation of all these people arises. The enterprising contractor 'Awwād solves the problem with least expenses for himself: he drives the peasants to a freight wagon adapted for the carriage of cattle, and goes himself to a passenger compartment.

During the trip the mother of 'Umar and Farḥa falls ill. All think that she is to die, they even make preparations for her funeral at the next station. The doctor, after having examined the ill woman breaks the news of her premeditated poisoning to the peasants and then to the coroner, who initiates an investigation and brings charges against 'Awwād in connection with the perpetrated felony. With the help of cash, the latter succeeds to evade punishment. Munīra gives birth to a son in the dirty and stale wagon. The contractor gives her a few miserable pennies as allowance, not wishing to take her with the child to the passenger compartment. The youngster Mas'ūd who is in love with Farḥa also is a source of trouble for him. 'Awwād by all means tries to get rid of the serious rival: dumps him down from the train, or sends him to prison, or chases him back home. And there the train arrives at the point of destination. The eyes are filled with happiness upon the sight of the boundless open spaces, the ripen wheat ears... But harvest machines work in the fields.

⁵ The title of the novel is connected with the ancient Arab proverb: "to come back with the shoes of Ḥunayn", which means "to come back without anything".

Thus do the last illusions crumble of the peasants, and first of all, of the young people who failing to become agricultural workers turn out to be useless and without a job.

As we see, the novel's plot is dynamic, full of situations of suspense. Life attacks the travellers with many problems, and through these conflicts different angles of Syrian reality are clearly brought up to light, and the characters of Zarzūr's heroes are brought to trial.

Among them, 'Umar distinguishes himself. It is exactly him that becomes the bearer of the ethical ideal of the author, having condensed into him the best traits of the people's soul and wisdom. Typologically, his image corresponds to the image of the peasant leader created by 'Abdarrahmān aš-Šarqāwī in the novel "*al-Ard*" (the Earth, 1954).

Comparing the novels of these two writers, it may be noted that if, as R. Allen writes, "aš-Šarqāwī's commitment to the cause of social reform is at times obtrusive in *al-Ard*" (Allen 1982: 79), then in the works of the Syrian writer the author's ideas and ideals dominate in the creative reproduction of reality, predetermining its plot and composition as well as its graphic structure. Zarzūr narrows down the artistic and descriptive potentialities of the novel form. The dialogue turns to be the chief artistic means upon which the narrative is based. Possibly it is not by chance that Zarzūr's novel is put on stage and its radio version is broadcasted by the Syrian radio.

A year after publishing "*al-Ḥuṣṣā wa-ḥuṣṣay Ḥunayn*", the novel of Ṣalāḥ Dihnī⁶ "*Millḥ al-Ard*" (The Salt of the Earth, 1972) was published, being dedicated to the migration of landless peasants. The plot canvas of the work consists of the life motions of the young peasant, 'Awayḍa, who has gone to look for his native village Bāḥita due to his father's illness. After his father's death, the hero remains to live with his relatives, but he does not want to be a farmhand as his ancestors. He leases a plot of land belonging to the village elder, with whose daughter he decides to cast his lot, and he tries alone to tackle with natural calamities. But scorching drought and a horde of rats destroy all crops and compel the hero to take the road again in search of a better lot.

Similarly to Zarzūr, the writer, while addressing the fate of the poverty-stricken peasants, wandering around in search of happiness, tries to rationalize the difficulties of village life in the first years of independence. The artistic concept of the world and man coincides in many aspects, the author's biased attitude and the reproduced reality determines its inevitable polarization, the insufficient plasticity of the depiction of characters, and the organic character of the plot action of the novel.

⁶ Ṣalāḥ Dihnī is known as a film director and critic.

It is appropriate to remember the just essential remark of R. Allen who wrote: "In Syria a number of writers of social-realist novels deal with the problems of the country's peasantry, although it has to be admitted that the results often tend to underline the frequently stated view that the expression of commitment to a cause does not guarantee a successful work of art or a positive critical response." (Allen 1992: 208)

The Syrian rural novel develops in the mainstream of the general tendencies of the genre, and of literature as a whole, with its failures and achievements, in the foundations whereof lies above all things the growing consciousness of the complexity, ambiguity, dialectical controversy of life events and the striving to attain them, to rationalize the multiformity of the subjective - objective reality. However, as the experience of a number of writers shows, these aspirations do not always find adequate artistic embodiment. Often the persuasiveness of the conceived characters, of plot development, even of details diminishes due to unskilful stylistic transposition, banality.

It is characteristic that the attention of Syrian novelists concentrates not only on the village with its diverse unsolved social and economic problems, but on the rationalisation of village reality through depiction of a particular fate by means of the analysis of the complex world of human feelings and emotions, by means of fathoming the ethical dominant of the hero. In this respect, the influence is felt of the tradition of Idrīs, in whose creative work, as V. Kirpichenko puts it, one can distinctly trace the striving to generalize one's own observations of reality, find the link of the individual's psychology with the social environment, the determination of the spiritual world of man by means of the ethical and moral rules dominating in society." (Kirpichenko 82)

A similar tendency is obviously emerging in the subsequent novel of Zarzūr "*al-Mudnibūn*" (The Guilty Ones, 1974), which, according to the confession of the author himself, is one of his most suffered books. The first drafts of the book were written in the years of his imprisonment in jail, and he undertook systematic work on the text in the mid sixties⁷. Taking into account a certain unevenness of the narrative which possibly may be explained by the long periods of writing, "*al-Mudnibūn*" considerably differs from the precedent novel of Zarzūr, although in certain aspects it repeats the general ideas thereof, deepens particular motives. But here the depiction of village life is realized not so much in its social dimensions as through moral and ethical manifestations, and is being supplemented by a deeper penetration into the spiritual world of the protagonists, as well as being accompanied by a fresh and authentic life environment.

⁷ See e.g. *al-Mawqif al-adabī*, Damascus 1982, No 129-130, p. 182.

Already the first lines of the work, representing an original poetical introduction, submit the key for the comprehension of the author's artistic manner, of his approach to the material, and bring evidence of the writer's disposition for a calm and measured narration.

Episodes from the life of two kin families change in sequence before the eyes of the reader. On the one hand, the first is the family of the poor man Ġadʿān al-ʿAbdallāh as an expression of the immortal patriarchal and national pillars; on the other hand, the second family is the family Šāliḥ ad-Diyāb, which is ranging high among other peasant families and is respected by the authorities. According to the author's free will, these families embody opposite ethical principles. The interaction thereof gives birth to the dramatic collision, which is the cornerstone of the novel's design and composition.

A long-lasting drought which has scorched the crops of the farmers compels the family of Ġadʿān al-ʿAbdallāh as well as many other people to become tenant farmhands. This is the situation whereby the peasant engaged in farming already is not a landowner but still does not seek employment, still some visibility of land possession exists.

However, a real danger becomes imminent, that of losing even this visibility. For as many years as the cruel drought reigns, the harvest remains minimal. The funds for living and for payment of the rent hardly suffice. Will Ġadʿān al-ʿAbdallāh be able to hold on to his plot of land, or will he, sooner or later, share the lot of many other landless farmers having left their native places in search of employment - this is the alternative inevitably emerging before the heroes.

It is remarkable that in this novel the writer finds a new method, in comparison with "*al-Ḥufāḥ wa-ḥuffay Ḥunayn*", of portraying the peasant personality. His protagonist does not possess that consciousness that characterized ʿUmar - the central personality of his precedent novel. Ġadʿān does not perceive things happening to him or to his fellow villagers as a manifestation of the general crisis in the country compelling them finally to leave their well inhabited places and move to town. "Their thoughts, Zarzūr writes, concentrated only on one thing - money... Every one of them mortgaged his plot of land and now worked with full efforts to save more money and repay the loan" (Zarzūr, *al-Mudnibūn* 258). Such is peasant psychology - eternal attraction to land. Wherever they find themselves, they think about it.

The author underlines the ethical mainstay of his heroes. The foundations of sound ethics, according to him, are the traditions consecrated by centuries of time. The scene of the wedding is represented like a fresh, colourful people's celebration. The traditional hospitality, the flaming dances, the ancient songs - all of these represent not an ethnographic intermission but the spiritual atmosphere peasants live in, and which the author succeeds to portray convincingly by artistic means. The reason contributing for this is that Zarzūr uses diverse methods of narration in contrast with the precedent novel-dialogue.

Through keen psychological analysis, without the author's persisting intervention, the realities of Syrian rural life are reproduced and a greater than ever plasticity is achieved as well as a true-to-life depiction of the personalities.

The rural theme is subject to investigation in Jān Aleksān's novel "*an-Nahr*" (The River, 1979). The plot of the novel takes place along the banks of the Euphrates river. In times of floods, the river manifests its wild character, sweeping away along its way farmers' shacks as well as land estates. The village teacher Aḥmad gives advice to his fellow villagers to erect a dike against the floods, but upon orders by the Ṣayḥ, the peasants are compelled to dig irrigation canals (in order to prepare the land for sowing seeds). The danger of a spring river flood arises each year. The peasants ultimately take in the appeal of the teacher and get ready to counteract the forces of nature. "Every time we shall erect a dike against floods. This year we have built it using earth but the dike was carried away by the flood waters. Next year we shall erect a stone dike and if it is once again carried away, then we shall construct a steel and concrete one... We shall not be stopped until we have built such a dike that won't be carried away by any flood" (Aleksān, *an-Nahr* 225), says one of the peasants. The Euphrates dam was finally erected and the dreams of Aleksān's protagonists came true.

It is remarkable that the writer observes the events of the past through the prism of subsequent experience. For him it is not so much the conflict character of the situation in those years that goes to the first plan of the novel as the objective laws, the unwavering steadfastness of the process. Time smooths out the sharpness of perception of the contradictions between different social strata; new nuances, new features appear in the portrayal of peasant types. The author accentuates as a trait of paramount importance in his heroes the devotion to land, the comprehension of the laws of nature, the feeling of fusion with it.

Aleksān's work is characterized by the clarity and wholeness of conception, the unity of plot and composition development, an organic style. The accuracy of social and psychological portrayals is in combination with the expressive verbal characterization of heroes, the juicy humour, the capability to capture the beauty of nature in its different manifestations. It should be also noted that, similarly to the book "*al-Mudnibūn*", the novel "*an-Nahr*" does not contain idealization, thickening of colours, sentimentality or nostalgia, but psychologically true, persuasive images of personalities.

The work of ʿAbdassalām al-ʿUḡaylī called "*al-Magmūrūn*" (The Flooded, 1979) in a certain sense bears semblance to the novel "*an-Nahr*". The writing of this book is preceded by stories about the rural countryside written in different periods. Among them are "*al-Kam'ah wa-l-kīnīn*" (Mushroom and Quinine) and "*Sāla d-dam*" (Blood Gushed), published in the collection "*Sā'at al-Mulāzīm*" (The lieutenant's watch, 1951), and "*an-Nahr sultān*" (The River Sovereign), published in the collection "*al-Hā'in*" (The Traitor, 1960), where al-ʿUḡaylī shows the finality, irreversibility of

changes in the village, linked to the scientific and technical progress. The author strives to express the human aspect of these changes in the novel "*al-Mağmūrūn*".

The transformations due to the progress of science and technologies in the village attract the sharp attention of the writer towards the traditional and ethical values connected with the close-to-nature rural life, which to a certain extent turn out to be in danger of disappearance. This major and complex philosophical question is treated in his new book.

The title of the work itself "*al-Mağmūrūn*" (The Flooded) is symbolic, it is of a dual sense. On the one hand, the title is historically specific. The chronological frames of the novel embrace the 70's, when the government undertook certain measures for the development of agriculture and for the improvement of peasant life. The construction of electric stations and urban housing began, co-operative associations were created.

The author narrates about the destinies of people forced to leave their native places and migrate to the uninhabited eastern regions, where in the desert "a handful of water is equal to a handful of blood" (al-ʿUğaylī, *al-Mağmūrūn* 25). Due to the erection of a dam, their village turns to be within the flooded zone. The submerging and the migration connected therewith obtain in the novel a generalized connotation, expressing to a certain extent the philosophical views of the writer: life is a motion, a motion in the search of unattainable happiness.

The dual plan contained in the title itself of the novel is present in the narrative structure as well. Al-ʿUğaylī subordinates it to the task of reproducing in artistic form the events which have had a place during the construction of the dam, and, together with this, of following the development of the character of the central personality.

The writer does not go deep into the details of the pre-history of the hero, he just marks it with a few strokes. The hero's father Ġābir al-Mabrūk, known by his nickname "the newcomer", kills as a young man his cousin and flees from retribution, hiding in one of the villages spread out along the banks of the river. Many years he lives with a feeling of guilt and remorse. The local inhabitants meet him with distrust and constantly humiliate him. All of his hopes Ġābir lays on his son ʿUṭmān, who distinguishes himself among the youngsters of his age by his natural intelligence and perspicacity.

He is endowed with other qualities too - an intuitive penetration into the essence of things, a faultless sense of ethics, but, first of all, he achieves his own "truth", expressed by the commitment of love to people. The hero preaches it among his co-villagers, among the members of the co-operative farm. In regard to it, all are equal: natives and newcomers. Always in the focus of events, he is not indifferent to the needs of his fellow villagers. As his mother remarks about him, in the village ʿUṭmān is "more useful than all gentlemen taken together" (*ibid.* 10). Faced by the problem of choice, he waives personal happiness, the union of marriage to a rich girl from

town. Together with other peasants, he goes to the East, to the place of illusions and unrealisable dreams.

The image of this personality is important for understanding the concept of the creative work of al-ʿUḡaylī. ʿUṭmān perhaps is one of his heroes, not so many in number, who have got to know the "truth". He is not much educated, he cannot rationalize and explicate all problems posed to him by his co-villagers, but he is capable of empathy, capable to discern without error human anguish, suffering, imperfection and disproportions. His philosophy is the philosophy of moral sense, of moral intuition.

It is characteristic that the ethical principle is made objective by means not of "high" ideas, or quality appraisals, but by a definite ethical perception, ethical emotion, and it touches the reader exactly on the sensual, emotional level.

The world created by the author is first of all the artistic analogue of reality. Therefore, he strives to show village life in conformity with the level of consciousness of his protagonists, not infrequently with the level of their "everyday life" consciousness, without corrections, without pressure or intervention, but granting freedom to their self-expression, skilfully using at that the potentialities of the modern novel technique.

In that way, each of the reviewed works reflects different aspects of the life of the Syrian rural countryside, and each is marked by the original talent of its author, by the level of artistic mastership that is manifested by means of the composition, by the choice of topics, by the methods of the portrayal of human character, by the specificity of narrative manner, by the latter's tonality, by the attachment to different artistic and expressive means.

Taken together, these works witness for the crystallisation of the concept of personality in the Syrian novel, which is displayed by the increased interest of writers in man in his individual manifestations, in the process of the achievement by the hero of the whole complexity and ambiguity of life phenomena, in his ethical search. This in its turn determines the changes in the structure and poetics of the novel. The hero not infrequently begins to act not only as the exponent of the author's ideas, but as a *sui generis* linking element of the overall composition of the work, since the sequence and continuity of narration are being determined now by his experience in no lesser degree than by the objective chronology of events. The portrayal develops on many planes, and associations begin to play a considerable role in it. Beside that, a marked shortening of distance takes place between the author and his hero, who more and more transforms from "an object of research" into an exponent of the most cherished ideas and emotions of the author. All this in the aggregate essentially stretches out the artistic horizons of national literature, and represents an index of the level of its development.

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