

PAINTING IN THE LITERARY OUTPUT OF TURAYYĀ AL-BAQṢAMĪ

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Turayyā al-Baqṣamī discovered her passion for art even as a child. It was while at school that her talent manifested itself and her first successes she started to relate through drawing as well as through story. As she herself claims: "I would paint for afternoons on end. It happened that, while in the fourth class at primary school, I tried to write poems and then paint pictures to accompany them"¹. It was also while at school that she organized her first exhibitions for which she received prizes. Although her studies in this field were initiated at the Academy of Fine Art in Cairo, they were quickly interrupted due to a bureaucratic oversight. Her husband, Muḥammad al-Qadīrī convinced her of the importance of studying Fine Art in Moscow, where she managed to study in 1974. At the Surikov Institute she studied graphics for seven years. In 1978 she held her first individual exhibition in Zaire. The next stage of artistic activity occurred in Senegal, where, after having finished her studies, she was able to join her husband, who at the time was head of the diplomatic mission.

Turayyā al-Baqṣamī's high graphic qualifications enabled her to illustrate those stories closest to her heart. And so she became the illustrator of all of her collections of stories: *al-ʿAraq al-aswad* (Black sweat) 1977, *as-Sidra* (Lotus) 1988, of her war stories *Šumūʿ as-sarādīb* (Cellar Candles) 1992, *Raḥīl an-nawāfīd* (The Windows' Flight) 1994 and the fairy tale for children *Mudakkirāt Fatūma al-kuwaytiyya aṣ-ṣaġīra* (Recollections of a Small Kuwaiti Fatuma).

The line drawing illustrations to the first collection *al-ʿAraq al-aswad* are of high artistic merit. In the sensitive and worked line we can recognize many years of academic study, and an equally individual artistic expression. This drawing also draws on the legacy of European Expressionism of the 19th and 20th centuries. At the same time, there are visible features of other cultures. To a small extent, we find here typical Arabic details. These drawings are in themselves an individual act of artistic activity. It is felt that they are not secondary, but rather of parallel relation to the stories. Among them a particular impression is generated by the drawings to the stories "*Umm Adam*" (al-Baqṣamī, *al-ʿAraq* 21) and "*al-Mullā*" (The Teacher, al-Baqṣamī, *al-ʿAraq* 49).

¹ On the basis of an interview conducted by the author with al-Baqṣamī in Kuwait, 7th April 1995.

Her subsequent exhibitions were in Dakar and Tunis. From 1984, that is, from the time she returned to Kuwait, Turayyā al-Baqṣamī has worked for the Ministry of Information, the journal *al-ʿArabī*, where she illustrates and writes her own texts. She has gained during this time the reputation as a fine art artist and often she meets the reproach that she is equally involved in literary forms. The years 1984-1990 are packed with artistic activity. In an interview carried out with her in Kuwait, she admitted: "I have written and painted. I have flown with my exhibitions all over the world"².

During the occupation, where for reasons of safety no writing could be undertaken, she painted. Being an individual of a versatile artistic education, and in this widely travelled, she was able to freely participate in the actual currents and tendencies of contemporary art. She is the author of a book entitled *al-Marsam al-ḥurr wa-riḥla 25 āman* (Free Art in the course of 25 years) which deals with contemporary Kuwaiti painters. In her notes, she writes of the inspiration of the images and creators of world art. She marvels at the dynamism of Picasso, Matisse's colour and the naive depth of Gauguin.

The drawings for the second collection of 1988 entitled *as-Sidra* (Lotus) appear to be already increasingly dependent on the stories that accompany them. In their form they represent the already later tendency in Turayyā's creativity. Here are numerous elements of stylization, strongly outlined forms, of which many indicate the inspiration of antiquity and other distant epochs. Of the drawings the composition for the cover story "*as-Sidra*" (Lotus) stands out where a symbolic threatening form — like an ancient mask — of a tree, which on the one hand is worshipped and on the other is a threat. Notable also in its expression is the drawing of the winged artist upturned to her work due to unfavourable circumstances in the short story "*Buḡʿat lawn*" (The Coloured Stain, al-Baqṣamī, *as-Sidra* 37). In this drawing appears what is already especially typical for Turayyā's later creativity, the marginal symbol representing a known cultural connotation — Fāṭima's hand, a bird or sunflower. The coloured cover to the collection of short stories "*as-Sidra*" presents a stylized portrait of a woman covered simply with symbolic and stylized elements of the real world, as well as of an intuitively active imagination. It is the voice of female judgement turned into a symbol, and, at the same time, the voice of universal inspiration.

The collection "*Šumūʿ as-sarādīb*" (Cellar Candles) of 1992 is opened by a colourful cover, the artistic origin of which could be European. One could find in it the Expressionist legacy of the noted creators of the 1920s and 1930s. The drawings inside already possess the stylized form typical for her later period. The drama of the plot — similar to Greek expressions — is almost imperceptible. Among the works I would

² On the basis of the interview *ibid.*

single out the illustrated "*Abwāb muġannaḥa*" (Winged Doors), full of lyricism — like the work of Chagall —, or "*Ataš bū Saḥīr*" (Abū Sahir's Desire) modern as far as divisions and stylistics are concerned (al-Baqsamī, *Šumūc* 62).

Mudakkirāt Faṭūma al-kuwaytiyya aš-šaġīra (Recollections of a Small Kuwaiti Fatuma) of 1992, describing the painful war experience of Fāṭima — Turayyā's daughter —, are illustrated with typical fairy tale stylization approaching colourful childish drawings and with the child's drawings themselves. It seems to me these are Fāṭima al-Qadīrī's own drawings — Turayyā's daughter's.

The last collection of short stories is *Raḥīl an-nawāfid* (The Windows' Flight) of 1994 in which the author says that "it carries the deepest artistic expression and has a very refined graphic lay-out"³. The stylistics of the illustration are very mixed and refined. The picture is often divided and the contents of the segments create mutually interacting detail — a lyrical composition. The drawings — still stylized and symbolic — portray the tragic atmosphere of the accompanying stories. Particularly striking is the visionary correspondence of the illustration to the story "*Raġul bilā 'aynayn*" (Man without Eyes, al-Baqsamī, *Raḥīl* 19) and the almost ancient heroic tragic nature of the illustration to the story "*Tuqūb fī d-dākira*" (Gaps in Memory, *ibid.* 49) and of the cover itself. The outstanding poetic beauty of the distinct composition characterizes the illustration to the story "*Qalbuhā al-ahḍar*" (Her Green Heart, *ibid.* 11).

Enjoying such a long artistic career, Turayyā uses various artistic techniques. In one of the interviews, to the question: 'How in one exhibition can one exhibit so many different works?', she answered: "I follow my heart when it's painting or writing, for every creation tells of a real experience and my experiences are as different as these works" (Janssen 1992).

Turayyā al-Baqsamī uses in her artistic creativity very lively colours because she feels life very strongly. One can feel that she is constantly artistically activated, because she does not like using conventional colours. She uses sky-blue, for it underlines her astrological feature of Pisces, and also green and brown, because they are dominant in nature. She uses comparatively little black, claiming that it is static and depressing in its expression. In the interview she assures: "I will paint as long as I'm able to. I will organize exhibitions. This gives me the opportunity of meeting people and the chance of constructive criticism for improving my own art" (Janssen 1992).

Turayyā uses the acrylic painting technique with as equal freedom as she does other graphic techniques, drawing or ceramics. She oscillates with equal freedom between the various cultures to which she devoted separate studies: Mesopotamian, Indian, Greek — the civilization of the Failak island amongst others — and African.

Arabian motifs and portrayals in her works accompany the religious and secular use of the metaphors of culturally different beliefs and civilizing experiences. "Her

³ On the basis of the interview *ibid.*

art can be best described as giving — unlimited giving of time and impressions” (Aḥmad 1994: VI, 22). In each of her works — as Kāmila Aḥmad writes in the above mentioned article — there exist sharp lines and one can feel the pulse of the East. Some of the works have names before they are created, while, in other cases, the picture is named after its completion. The works created during the war are particularly outstanding for their layered symbolism. Various inter-cultural symbols contained in the drawings and graphics are proof of her humanistic attitude and unyielding imagination, in which there is no division into past and present, because everything is always there, the whole stock of civilizing thought forming. In later works, the divisions are often complex, and the surface consists of several segments filled with various magical-symbolic contents like in “The Alphabet of Peace” of 1991. In this work, in six accompanying segments, are abstract magic pictures and signs connected with the symbolism of peace, among others, a face, a pigeon, an arrow. The different colours of each segment create, however, an agreeable composition in a warm colour scheme. In the catalogue of her XIIIth exhibition we read: “In most of her pictures the dream of peace is obvious. White pigeons have appeared more than once expressing the real desire to end the real phantoms. In the pictures, all the individuals are without hair, reminding one more of mummies than of human beings, which signifies death and the approaching terrible end. Only through symbolism can her humanism, full of despair and protest, have its expression”.

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