

TRADITION AND NOVELTY IN THE CONTEMPORARY PROSE OF THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

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The development of prose in the United Arab Emirates occurred much later than in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia or Bahrain. Cultural literary periodicals from abroad started to arrive here only at the beginning of the 1970s. The local press started to develop in a dynamic way at the end of the 1960s. The author of the first short story *Qulūb lā tarḥam* (Merciless Hearts), which was published at the end of the 1960s, was ʿAbd-allāh Ṣaqr Aḥmad. He also wrote at the same time the first collection of short stories in the history of Emirate literature. It was entitled *al-Ḥašaba* (A Piece of Wood). However it was not to reach readers as it was burnt because of its contents, which were full of biting criticism of the British, and the English occupation (*Multaqāʾ*¹ 15).

The first literary attempts of the young generation of Emirate writers were published within the pages of the following periodicals: *an-Naṣr*, *az-Zamālik*, *aš-Šabāb*, *al-Ablī*. After gaining independence in 1971 there occurred a rapid development of schooling. In 1977 the al-ʿAyn University was founded (*Emirates* 100).

On the market there appeared the journal *al-Ittiḥād*, the weekly *Aḥbār Dubay* and the monthly *al-Mağma*¹. The first stage in the history of contemporary Emirate literature is constituted by a group of young writers who appeared in the years 1972-1975. Amongst the young creators the following are worthy of note: ʿAlī ʿUbayd ʿAlī – the author of the short stories *al-Ġazāʾ* (Punishment), *Ḍaḥīyyat aṭ-ṭamaʿ* (The Victim of Greed), *Ġaḥīm* (Hell), *Hādā huwa al-ḥubb* (Such is Love) or *Layl bilā āḥīr* (Night without End), Muḥammad ʿAlī al-Mīrī – the author of the short stories *Yawm fi ḥayāt muwazzaf ṣaġīr* (A Day in the Life of an Ordinary Civil Servant) and *ʿĀbir sabīl* (The Traveller), ʿAbdalʿazīz Ḥalīl – from whose pen came the short story *Min aġli waladī* (For My Son) as well as ʿAbdalḥamīd Aḥmad – author of works such as *al-Farār* (Escape) or *Ḥalf al-bāb al-muġlaq* (Behind Closed Doors) (*Multaqāʾ*¹ 16-17).

It can generally be concluded that short stories from this period belong to the traditional romantic current. They were filled with pain, suffering, desperation, sadness and disappointment. The subject matter concerned social matter, *i.e.* the marriage of underage girls, the lack of respect for the opinions and aspirations of the young. Besides which in those stories we notice attempts to undertake new topics

¹ At present on the market are available newspapers such as *al-Ittiḥād*, *al-Faġr*, *al-Waḥda* published in Abu Dhabi, *al-Bayān* published in Dubai or *al-Ḥalīġ* in Sharjah (*Emirates* 124).

which are connected with the introduction of a new life style linked to the economic and financial changes caused by the discovery of crude oil.

The years 1975-1979 meant a period of infatuation with wealth and material goods which is why on the book market there did not appear too many new titles. The following *as-Šaqā'* (Labour) written by 'Abdal'azīz aš-Šarhān deserves inclusion amongst these few. The works which it contains are the conclusions and experiences of the author from his period of study abroad. Moreover, the yearning for his country has borne fruit in stories concerning the life and work of people at sea. At the same time Ismā'īl Ša'bān 'Alī and 'Abdalqādir Aḥmad Nūr made their debut publishing their works within the pages of *Aḥbār Dubay* and *al-Aḥlī*.

The year 1979 was a special one for writers in the Arab Emirates, for there were founded many cultural societies including cultural social clubs in Abu Dhabi and Sharjah. Moreover, literary evenings were organised there where the works of contemporary writers were presented, together with cultural exhibitions promoting the works of young artists. The *al-Azmina al-'arabiyya* periodical was created.

In the short stories of this period the social subject matter dominates. Problems of man's freedom and his place in society, the discovery of crude oil and its influence on the everyday life of the inhabitants of the Emirates are discussed. Many new collections of short stories were published including: *al-Hurūğ 'alā wašm al-qabīla* (Breaking Out of the Tribal Tradition) written by Muḥammad Ḥasan al-Ḥarbī, *as-Sibāha fī 'aynay ḥalīğ yatarwahḥaš* (Bathing in the Eyes of the Wild Gulf) by 'Abdalḥamīd Aḥmad, *Dālika z-zamān* (Those Times), *Zallat al-'adārā* (The Mistakes of the Maidens) by 'Abdarridā as-Sağwānī, *Ḥubb min naw' āḥar* (A Different Kind of Love), *al-Furṣa al-aḥīra* (Last Chance) and *Ṣadāqa* (Friendship) written by Muḥammad al-Murr.

According to Dr. Diyā' aš-Šadiqī a literary work is composed of three elements: the creative personality of the author, pictures from life and elements determining the relation between the author's own ego and the subject he has undertaken (aš-Šadiqī 1989:153-154).

'Abdalḥamīd Aḥmad divided the development of the short story in the Emirates into four stages:

- * stage one - the initial one, the end of the 1960s. The main representative here is 'Abdallāh Ṣaqr and his collection of short stories *al-Ḥašaba* (A Piece of Wood),
- * the second stage called the stage of continuity in which new writers make their debuts,
- * the third stage is a period of cultural stagnation and a weakening of activity among short story writers,
- * while stage four lasts from the end of the 1970s to the present day and is characterised by a constant development of culture (aš-Šadiqī 1989:158).

Emigrate writers examine in their works the subject of the past. This is linked to the subject of the sea and its influence on the lives of the inhabitants. Writers equally

explore the life of the inhabitants of the desert, countryside and the old Emirate districts, describing their traditions and customs, though not avoiding equally contemporary subject matters connected with the discovery of crude oil and the construction of superb municipalities. So by way of an example 'Alī Muḥammad Rāšid in the short story *Riḡāl fī miḥna* (Men in Sorrow) tells of sailors: the captain of a ship and his son who deal in pearls. The culminating point being the death of the captain, which leads to conflict between the sailors and his son against the back cloth of the division of the pearls.

A story abounding in descriptions: of the sea, of children's games and the customs of the inhabitants is Sa'īd Sālim al-Hankī's work entitled 'Abdallāh aṣ-Ṣaḡīr ... *waṣīyya* (Advice for Little 'Abdallah) The subject for the story is the rebellion of the main hero Ibn Zāhir, who is a fisherman on the ship Husayn.

Colonialism together with the artificial economic and social division in the Emirates is the subject of the short story *Yawm uḥissu bihi annahu ya'īšu* (The Day I Feel Alive in) written by Ġum'a al-Fayrūz. This short story is a registration of the unwritten history of the region.

The countryside and its problems have been touched on in the short story *al-Ġarrād* (Locusts) by Nāṣir Az-Zahirī. The author describes a village where abundant rains fertilised the soils resulting in vegetation. The joy of the villagers is however shattered by an invasion of locusts which brings the appearance of the spectre of famine. *Šidda wa-tazūl* (The Distress Which Passes) written by Nāṣir Ġubrān is the story of a child called Ġama'ān, who finds a tin can on the shore. He wants to make a water holder for birds out of it, yet a fire breaks out in his home caused by the tin which contains a deadly substance. This is confirmed by the English officers who come to the Ġama'ān's house

The discovery of oil brought about many changes in the traditional social structure of the Emirates. Citizens stood in the face of the 'money-social' conflict (aṣ-Ṣadiqī 1989:179). For there had taken place a conflict between the values in force prior to the discovery of crude oil and the values of the new era which results in the fact that the works created at this time dealt with the then internal problems between tradition, which is slowly disappearing, and the values which are gradually taking their place. And thus the short story by Ibrāhīm Mubārak entitled 'Ašīq al-baḥr (The Sea's Lover) is saturated with an enormous yearning for the past. It tells of the life of a diver who must abandon his beloved sea. The story is romantic. The reader senses the languish for old time values, for the tents never to be seen again, for the small street cafes, for the traditional bazaars and the old mud buildings.

In another short story Nāṣir Ġubrān entitled *as-Sayyid ḡayr marwḡūd* (The Master is Out) describes the life of three generations: a father living in the past, a son living in the present, and a grandson living in the future. The father lives in the country and works at sea. Despite the son's insistence he does not want to move to the town. The son belongs to the society newly enriching itself, he is educated and wealthy. He

lives in a modern house in the town. The father after several visits to his son's house claims that his son's life is saturated with spuriousness, egocentricism and hypocrisy. The son in his talks with his father refers to the poor and beggars with scorn which means that the father feels sadness and regret for the values he instilled in his son and which have completely lost their meaning in the town. The shattered father considers that he has lost a son, yet sees hope in the future generation represented by the grandson.

An interesting short story, which constitutes a protest against the rejection of tradition, is the work entitled *Tufūla wa ḥulm al-qabīla* (Childhood and the Dreams of the Tribe) by the female writer Su'ād al-'Arīmī. It presents the life of a man in the new reality as well as the choice attached to it which he must take everyday. The hero has moved from the countryside to the town where he has found a job in a government department. His new surroundings mean that he has to change his previous life and customs: his way of dressing and speaking. He had to become used to total subservience towards his superiors, to accept their tiresome and cynical remarks and orders. He was even forced to shave off his beard which had been a symbol of masculinity in his old surroundings. He was unable to accept the new reality and as a consequence committed suicide. This act is an expression of the condemnation for the new reality, a rejection of the new social relations and principles based on material gain and hypocrisy.

Contemporariness is understood by Emigrate writers as the social, political and economic changes occurring in the town. They are caused by the chances which have yet to take on a concrete form.

Sa'īd al-Ḥankī in the short story *Humūm al-muwāṭin S* (The Worries of Citizen S) presents us with the new reality that rules in the newly rich society: falsehood, show, unhealthy relationships between people, hypocrisy. In the short story he describes the story of a young educated man who finds work in a government office. The said hero stands before the choice of fulfilling his own whims or those of others. He lives in conflict with those values ingrained in him by his father: not to drink, not to steal, not to commit adultery and not to bribe. However at work daily he meets with bribery, theft and adultery. The author in his short story encloses a message addressed to the old and the new generation. He considers that a lot of time will be necessary for the generations to come closer and to mutually understand one another. Until which time they are gulfs apart.

Muḥammad Ḥasan al-Ḥarbī presents in the short story entitled *Wisām šaraf* (The Order of Honour) the nature of the new relationships in work based on greed and the using of man for material gain. The main figure is a workman who spent the best years of his life working in a factory. He spared neither effort nor health to bring about its development. However when he became older he was weak and started to fall ill and was sacked unfeelingly. The author shows the ruthlessness in relations between employee and employer. He condemns the brutality, cruelty and lack of

human reaction brought about by greed and avarice. The short story ends with the hero's tragic death at the work place in full view of his colleagues and other workers. The short story *Buṣṣā fī s-sittīn* (Bushra is Sixty) from the pen of ʿAbdarrīdā as-Saġwānī shows the negative sides of the reality surrounding us. The author stigmatises the marriage of old men with very young girls who are forced into it by poverty as is the case of the heroine, a young Asian woman. The author is of the view that despite the 'riches' with which Abū l-Ḥaṣā surrounds his wife she is not happy, for her husband is unable to guarantee her what a husband of the same age would surely guarantee.

ʿAbdalḥamīd Aḥmad in the short story *al-Bayḍār* (The Threshing Floor) describes the problem of people settling from one country to another in the search for work. They are the so-called citizenless people, for at the beginning of the process of creating states within the area of the Arabian Gulf there was no requirement for identity cards. This problem is characteristic for many countries of the Gulf and in, for instance, Kuwait still remains a problem even today. It is such people who are the heroes of this short story. Marīš was by origin an Omani who arrived in the Emirates thirty years before. He worked on the palm plantations, however as a result of the changes occurring he lost his job because he did not possess an identity card to confirm his citizenship. He decided therefore to return to Oman, but was not allowed in as he did not have a passport. Driven to despair he commits suicide.

Safar al-asfār (The Journey of a Journey) is a story by Naṣir az-Zāhirī illustrating the Palestinian problem. The main hero travels from Arab country to country in search of work. Finally he achieves his aim and becomes a janitor in a twenty-two storey building. It is no accident that the building is twenty-two stories high. For this is the number of Arab countries which are touched by many problems and difficulties as equally becoming involved in various conflicts. In the short story the suffering of the hero abroad is emphasised along with his longing to die and be buried in his own land. The author condemns, and blames, the Arab world for the undoing of the Palestinian nation.

The Palestinian subject matter has found reflection in the short story *Hādā l-waġh laysa lī* (The Face is Not Mine) by Suʿād al-ʿArīmī. The writer has also dealt with the subject of the Iran-Iraq war in her short story *Baqāyā dam* (The Remains of the Blood). Despite this it should be emphasised that Emirate writers concentrate chiefly on local issues in their political, social and economic aspects. The social aspects of customs and social relations definitely dominate.

The short stories dealing with the past are characterised by romanticism. They are defined as 'pure and unblemished in comparison with the cruel and dirty present day' (aṣ-Ṣadīqī 1989:208). The short stories that deal with the present day contain criticism of the town. The relationships between people that exist there are based on mutual interest which means that man feels within them lost and alienated. On the

one hand he cannot get used to them, while on the other it is difficult for him to dispense with them.

In the Emirates women equally publish their works alongside men. To the better known belong Salmā Maṭar Yūsuf, Laylā Aḥmad, Maryam Ġama'a Faraġ or Amīna 'Abdallāh Bušhāb.

Salmā Maṭar Yūsuf displays some state or desire to share their own ideas. The main subject matter for her works is the woman and her problems. It is around her that the action is concentrated, social relations are played out. Generally she is dependant on someone. In the short story entitled *az-Zabra* (The Flower) the woman influences the life of a man. The hero *Halfān*, as a result of a relationship with a woman, discovers a different, new world which earlier was alien to him. He starts to compare her world with his. The woman's life intrigued him. He tries to think in her categories, to become acquainted with her life situation as well as all those social conditions which limit her freedom. The world of women is extremely realistically presented in the short story *'Ušba* (Herb) by the self same author. This is the story of a neglected orphan who is looked after by her uncle. When she starts to grow up however she is forced to marry a man who is only interested in her dowry and the sons she can bear him. This short story clearly deals with the problem of male and family domination over a woman and her will. In the short story *an-Našīd* (Hymn) Salmā undertakes the subject of a woman discarded by society due to the traditions and customs in force which allow for the degradation somebody considered to be worse individual – something a woman is considered to be. The heroine is a beautiful woman who by her appearance, behaviour and charming personality drives men wild. She uses her body to take revenge on men. At the same time the author shows her against the background of those social relationships in force, presenting her as a person persecuted, imprisoned, and unhappy. A woman as chattel who may be sold to whoever offers more is presented in the short story entitled *al-'Urs* (The Wedding). The heroine is forced to repeatedly marry and divorce merely to bring profit to her family.

Critics are united in their appraisal that the most important elements in Salmā Maṭar Yūsuf's short stories are the beginning and the end. Some consider that the beginning is even more important for it is generally attractive and draws the reader. At the same time it contains the key to understanding the whole work. In some of the works the very beginning is a short story in itself, for example *Sā'a wa-a'ūdu* (I'll Return in an Hour). Her endings are however often not clear, muddled, ending in death, disappearance or equally are left open. And so in the above mentioned short story *Sā'a wa-a'ūdu* (I'll Return in an Hour) the heroine disappears but equally well

could have died. In turn in the short story *‘Ušba* (Herb) the heroine dies, while in the work *al-‘Urs* (The Wedding) the writer leaves the matter unexplained².

Salmā Maṭar Yūsuf is also a poetic figure, hence often the usage in her short stories of poetical language is there in order to deepen the substance of the events.

Another woman writer is Laylā Aḥmad, who is considered to be a representative of a symbolic current. The language of symbols dominated the collection of short stories *al-Ḥayma*, *al-mabrağān*, *al-waṭan* (Tent, Festival, Fatherland). In the short story entitled *Kanāra* (Canary) a woman is the symbol of the fatherland.

Within the pages of her short stories there comes about a conflict between generations, and their strain is dependant on social, economic and political transformations which play a key role in psychological and environmental spheres. These transformations do not remain without influence on the behaviour of generations, which as a consequence leads to differences between them. The discovery of crude oil changed and divided a society which until then had lived on fishing and the pearl trade. The generation of fathers and grandfathers was based on this traditional model of life, it took pride in the customs and traditions before the period of the discovery of oil and the economic boom. The new generation of sons and grandsons has been brought up in the prosperity based on quick profit, a sense of comfort and affluence. The most important aim for it is the acquisition of a high level of material wealth. These problems find reflection in the short story by Laylā Aḥmad entitled *Ḥašrağa* (Alert).

Laylā Aḥmad's short stories do not have a political character, even though they at times touch on the problems of social relations, matters of the fatherland or the struggle between generations. The most important for him is man. The fatherland is unable to function correctly if its citizens are unable to understand one another and do not trust one another.

Maryam Ğama‘a Farağ presents in his short stories various aspects of the new reality in the Emirates. In his collection entitled *Fayrūz* (Fayruz) he concentrates on the presentation of people of the same generation who are linked by similar life problems. And hence in the short story *‘Abbār* (Crossing by Ferry), for example, reality has driven the hero insane, while in turn in the short story *az-Zarwāyā al-arba‘a* (Four Corners) the hero is driven to ruin or even to death as in the short story *Ṣāliḥ al-Mubārak* (Blessed Salih). In the short story *ar-Riḥ* (The Wind) Maryam Ğama‘a Farağ presents us with two human attitudes: the first subjected to nature and the second totally dependant on the help of others.

Anwar al-Ḥaṭīb has written about this writer, among other things, that the action does not develop in a simple way, being even complex in the short story *Šu‘ūr* (Feelings), several short stories contain symbolic elements, for example *Ṣāliḥ al-*

² Compare al-Ḥaṭīb 1989:52-57.

Mubārak (Blessed Salih), often an important role is played in them by memory as can be seen in the works *Ġufūl* (Fear) or *Bidāya* (The Beginning) (al-Ḥaṭīb 1989:99-100). The writer Amīna ʿAbdallāh Būšhān describes in her works society as the carrier of disease. In its present stage one cannot distinguish its symptoms. The short story entitled *Zahīra ḥāmīya* (Hot Afternoon) shows a man and the long period of development of his disease before it starts to spread. The author broaches the question of class conflicts presenting the rich heroes for times past and contrasting them with the contemporary rich. The short story *Mabra* (The Mare) presents the strength of the effect of money. It tells of the inhabitants of a small poor village who approve of, and agree with, the actions of Sheikh Sulaymān, an influential oil tycoon, who marries in turn their daughters and after several months abandons them. Amīna ʿAbdallāh Būšhān presents a negative hero who uses his material position and self-confidence to satisfy his desires. A similar type of hero appears in the short story *Ḥayyāğ* (Excitement) from the collection *An-našīd* (Hymn). The author desires to present us with known types of hero so that the reader is able to identify with them and recognise them. We can find such distinct descriptions in the short stories mentioned *Zahīra ḥāmīya* (Hot Afternoon) and *Mabra* (The Mare). The most important feature of Amīna ʿAbdallāh Būšhān's writing is the creation of bonds between the heroes of her short stories and the reader. As far as the novel in the United Arab Emirates is concerned it started to develop only in the 1970s. The first novel to be noted was Rāšīd ʿAbdallāh entitled *Šāhinda* (Shahinda) published in 1972, which is a form of fairy tale. The author tries to give it a universal character, hence the absence in the defining of the location of the action, the elements of which jump. Another novel is ʿAbdallāh an-Nāʿūrī's attempt entitled *ʿUnq yabḥaṭ ʿan ʿiqd* (A Neck Seeks a Necklace). This was written in the form of a sensational novel and looks at the subject of the work of a police investigation department, presenting the investigation procedures and demasking the influential social layer. The author based his writings on authentic material. Muḥammad ʿUbayd Ġabāš undertook an attempt at a psychological novel. This is entitled *Dāʿiman yaḥdūt fī l-layl* (It Always Happens at Night). The author analyses the agitation and psychological problems of the heroes: Ḥālīd, Sālīm al-Māğīd, Aḥmad Nāšīr and Fāṭīma Nāšīr. From this novel there emanates a criticism of the social structuring of the Emirates together with the presentation of the superiority of educated people who to some degree attempt to isolate themselves from the rest of society. The traditional subject of the sea as well as the influx of illegal immigrants is described in the novel *as-Sayf wa-z-zahra* (The Sword and the Flower) by ʿAlī Abū r-Rīš. This novel is based on actual facts and tells of a man who always defended immigrants up to the point where he is convinced that they are rapists, murderers and devoid of all morality. The action is played out around twelve main figures who discuss the question of the incoming work force. The author, in dealing with this important problem, does not however attempt to analyse it. He leaves this up to the reader.

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