

Recent Trends in Arabic Fiction

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I. INTRODUCTION

Literature of any language over the globe, including Arabic, can not be approached as a fixed and freestanding object made up of words on a page. Neither meaning could be projected as something metaphysical caged in physicality of tongue-sounds engineered through sound-vibrations. Likewise, the saga concerning the difference between a writer and a reader, the theory of author's death, the role of geo-historical temporality in determining the content/s of a given text can hardly be straight-jacketed when it comes to discussing literature as mirror of humans' individual and collective psyche and sociology. The point becomes amply clear when the successive literary theories (Classicism, Romanticism, Realism, Surrealism, Formalism, Structuralism or Semiotics, Post-structuralism or Deconstruction, Marxism, Feminism and Post-colonialism, etc) as doctrinal and physiological-evaluative methods strive to study literary narrative with an aim to propose answers to above perspectives in relation to modern Arabic fiction.¹

II. ARABIA: THE MODERN LITERARY ODYSSEY

Contemporary Arabic literary discourse represents the Arab writer's cognitive of the multi-dimensional psychic and social reality in a post-modern world. It was neither possible nor desirable for the Arab writer and reader to play innocence vis-à-vis emerging doctrinal and projective literary experiments in a globalized world. Thanks to the celebrated theorists of postmodernism, semiotic challenge, pragmatism, etc, (represented in stalwarts like Karl Barth (1886-1968), Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), Paul de Man (1919-1983), Julia Kristeva (1941-), Noam Chomsky (1928-), and the camaraderie, the Arab literary and aesthetic milieus became familiarized with new bandwagons of postmodernism, altermodern, new urbanism, cyberpunk, bio-punk, post-irony and meta-narrative, besides new Puritanism, futurism, etc, and the Arab men of letters presented to the neighbor or the world the best he could offer in terms of contemporary literary craftsmanship. Ihab Hasan (1925-2015)², Alan Kirby³ and numerous others have posited as to how humanity has bypassed post-modernity, a delayed germination of an older seed planted by artists like Marcel Duchamp during modernism high noon of the 1920s and 1930s. Postmodernism as a set of critical and rhetorical practices sought to destabilize the modernist

¹ See Prof. Mohammad Sanaullah:

مشاهد و مطارحات في الأدب و اللغة و الثقافة (على كره، 2014م)

² http://www.ihabhassan.com/postmodernism_to_postmodernity.htm

³ "The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond", *Philosophy Now*, no. 58 (2006)

touchstones of identity, historical progress and epistemic certainty. As projected by Ihab Hasan, there moved through this (our period) a vast will to unmaking, affecting the body-politic, the body cognitive, the erotic body, the individual psyche, the entire realm of discourse in the west.

The Arab academic and literary circles have never been averse to the literary paradigms evolving outside their traditional milieu in any given points of history. The translation of Aristotle's *Poetica* and *Rhetorica* by Ishaque b. Hunain and Matta ibn Yunus via Syriac language in the middle ages⁴ and consequently their reconciler assimilation into the poetic canons of Farabi (c. 870-950), Qudama ibn Jafar (c. 873-932), Ibn Sina (980-1037), Ibn Rushd (1126-1198), Hazim Qartajenni (1211-1386) and others are best evidence to drive home the point. Reformist drives of Mohammad Ali Pasha (1769-1849) included missions to European capitals, chiefly Paris, and translation of European books of science and literature into Arabic under the aegis of *Madrasat al-alsun* founded in 1835 and headed by Rifa'a al-Tahtawi (1801-1873). At the turn of the Twentieth Century Arabic literary scholars began applying Western models to the evaluation of Arabic literary criticism. Marxist socialism proved especially popular, thanks to the endeavors of a camaraderie headed by Michel Aflaq (1910-1989) and his friends in Syria, Lebanon and Egypt. But it was not until more recently in the 1970's and 1980's that Structuralism was applied to Arabic literary criticism. In his pioneering work, *Towards a Structural Analysis of Pre-Islamic Poetry*, Abu Abu Deeb applied Levi-Strauss's technique of myth analysis to Labid's *mu'allafa*, declaring that the three modern movements which have made it impossible to view the universe as it was previously viewed are Marxism, Picasso's vision, and structuralism. Structuralist studies in the Arab world thrive especially in North Africa. Most Arab critics who use linguistic techniques have been North Africans who keep closely in touch with intellectual developments in France. Amongst them, the dominant influences have been those of Tzvetan Todorov (born 1972), Roland Barthes (1915-1980), Vladimir Propp (1895-1970) and Lucien Goldman (1913-1970). Scholars such as Moroccan Fihri al-Fasi (born 1958), Syrian in-exile in Algeria Abderrahman al-Haj Saleh (born 1961), Salah Fadal, Abdussalam Musaddi, Abdullah Ghazzami, among others, figure among the internationally acclaimed structuralist critics in our times.

III. PARADIGM SHIFT

In Pre-Islamic Arabia, people believed that poetry was picture-perfect of their life: الشعر ديوان العرب. But the post-modern Arab ebullience with vertical and horizontal flow of works of modern-postmodern and post-postmodern sagas made many observers think: Fiction is the picture-perfect of Arab life: القصة ديوان العرب. The way Arab writers, academia, critics, readers and culture-connoisseurs interacted with nonconventional ideas, paradigms and even whims and fancies in the arena of letters globally while testifies the frontiers of Arabia's literary perceptibility at one hand, it, on the other hand, uncovers silhouettes of historicity and continuity in regard to some meta-narratives such as *Arabian Nights* and its metamorphoses in postmodern narrative techniques.

Among the Arab postmodernist fiction, according to Mustafa Atiya Jumu'a (*ما بعد الحدائفة في الرواية العربية الجديدة*)⁵ focusing on the core issues of self, nation and identity, one can epitomize the Syrian Abderrahman Hallq for

⁴ See De Lacy O'leary, *How Greek Science Passed to the Arabs* (Goodword Books, 2001), pp. 20-35

⁵ See Mustafa Atiya Jumu'a:

his: قلاع ضامرة *Qila' Damirah*, the Syrian Nihad Seris (b. 1950) for his : الصمت و الصخب *Al-sumt wa al-Sakhb*, the Algerian Yasmina Saleh (b. 1969) for her وطن من زجاج *Watan min Zijaj*, as story of a generation that does not believe in apologizes, Egyptian Mahmud Hamid's أحلام محرمة *Ahlaam Muharramah*, and Egyptian Idris Ali for his انفجار جمجمة *Infijar jumjumah* (begged best Egyptian Novel prize in 1999).

Notwithstanding the polemics and counter-polemics of ethical-institutional permissibility on holier-than-thou grounds applied to literature, who can dispel the magic of the Moroccan Picaresque Mohammad Choukri (1935-2003) and his *Al-Khubz al-Hafi* and Fatima Mernissi in her series on *Sheherzade?* Algerian Tahir Wattar (1936-2010), Wasiny L'araj (b. 1954), most celebrate Arabophone Ahlam Mustgahanimi (b. 1953), Mohammad Moulsehoul aka Yasmina Khadra (b. 1955), etc, after the generation of Katib Yacine (1929-1989), Maulud Far'un (1913-1962), Mohammad Dib (1020-2003), etc, have become internationally acclaimed literary figures. Tunisia's Salahuddin Bujah (b. 1956), Libya's Ibrahim Al-Koni (b. 1948), the Egyptian Jamal al-Ghitani (1945-2015), Edwar al-Kharrat (1926-2015), Ala' al-Aswani (b. 1957) and others after the celebrated Najib Mahfuz (1911-2006), Yahya Haqqi (1905-1992), Taufiq al-Hakim (1898-1987), etc, Palestine's Ghassan Kanafani (1936-1972), Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (1920-1994) and Sehr Khalifa (b. 1942), Syria's Zakariya Tamir (1931-), Muhammad al-Maghut (1934-2006), Abdurrahman Hallaq, Nihad Seris, etc, Iraqi-Saudi Abdurrahman Munif (1933-2004), Jordanian Ghalib Halasa (1932-1989), Saudia's Ghazi al-Qusaibi (1940-2010), Oman's Saif al-Rahbi (b. 1956) and Saud al-Muzaffar, Yemen's Wajdi al-Ahdal (b. 1973), Sudan's Tayyab Swaleh (1929-2009) and Imad Barraka, Iraq's Ghalib Farman Tu'ma (1927-) among scores of other stalwarts in fiction have installed Arab narratology on the empyrean of glory and fame in all contemporary perspectives of literary discourse.⁶

It goes without saying that a brilliant and diversified cacophonous yet coherent narrative marks the contemporary Arab fiction. The Egyptian seismograph of social changes, Pharoanist, Allegorist, Chronicler and Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006) with published works of 34 novels, over 350 short stories, dozens of movie scripts and five plays over a 70-year career rules the roost when it comes to grand narratives. *The Cairo Trilogy* depicts the lives of three generations of different families in Cairo from World War I until after the 1952 military coup that overthrew King Farouk. His works illustrated a microcosm of Egypt, and by the time a statue was erected in his honor in Cairo in 2003, Naguib Mahfouz was already a legend in his own lifetime – a literary, ideological and moral authority.⁷

ما بعد الحداثة في الرواية العربية الجديدة – الذات، الوطن، الهوية (إي كتب، 2017م)

⁶ See Prof. Mohammad Sanaullah Nadawi:

مقاربات في السرد العربي الحديث و المعاصر (على كره: منشورات جامعة على كره، 2016م)

⁷ See Rasheed El-Enany, *Naguib Mahfouz: The Pursuit of Meaning* (Psychology Press. ISBN 978-0-515-07395-0)

Together with Naguib Mahfouz, the half-Iraqi half-Saudi Abdelrehman Munif (1933-2004) succeeded with his voluminous works in transforming the literary landscape of the Arab world by making the novel central to its cultural and political concerns just as it had been in Europe during most of the 19th century. Three novels of the Saudi quintet were translated into English by Peter Theroux: *Cities of Salt* (translated by Peter Theroux), *The Trench*, and *Variations on Night and Day* published by Knopf in New York. The Munif's words are a narrative of encounter, with disruptions, losses, material wealth, corruption, politics, distorted modernity, and finally of himself. Ahmed Saadawi's novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* which just won the 2014 International Prize for Arabic Fiction, revolves around a suicide bombing that shakes a neighborhood in the Iraqi capital. It is a fictional representation of the process of everyone killing everyone. The story rotates among a large cast of characters, moving briskly from dilapidated alleys to gated compounds, drawing the reader into a web of mysterious crimes with moments of occasional lightness, whether from gossiping neighbors or advice-swapping ghosts.

The ever-increasing new and adventurous forms in contemporary Arab literary works are a valued repertoire and artistic metamorphose of contemporary globalized, digitalized and demoralized world. In *The Unemployed* (Al-Atil) by the Egyptian novelist Nasser Iraq, a disillusioned new university graduate from the Cairo slums ends up working as a waiter, dreaming of going to Dubai. Suppressed by his father and frustrated by his unemployment, Mohammad Zabbal becomes sexually impotent, his self-confidence totally eroded. Mohammad represents a generation that has been failed by the state. Similar social and cultural conditions are portrayed from a different but equally somber perspective in *The Women of Basateen*, by the Tunisian Habib Selmi. Set in the Basateen middle-class district of the capital city Tunis, Selmi beautifully paints the changes in society where a mix of social and economic frustration leads to the rise of religiosity (exhibited after the revolution by the stunning victory of the Islamists).

Two Lebanese novels, *Druze of Belgrade* by Rabee Jaber (born 1972), and *The Vagrant*, by Jabbour Douaihy (born 1949), offer fresh portrayals of sectarianism in Lebanon – one historic and the other more recent. In Rabee's *Druze* we go back to the second half of the 19th century, when hundreds of Druze, a self-absorbed religious minority in Lebanon and Syria, were deported by the Ottoman rulers, and sent to Belgrade to spend years in prison. Douaihy's *Vagrant*, on the other hand, is a fine work about conflicting religious identities at the height of civil war.

The protagonist of the Algerian Bashir Mufti's *Toy of Fire* warns army generals who held the country in their iron grip for decades that the revolution of the suppressed is coming. Reflecting on the bloody 10-year civil war in the country, during the 1990s, Mufti's characters debunk the generals' belief that after their playing of various groups off against each other, and the rivers of blood spilled, the people are now exhausted, with no energy left for revolution.

In *Embrace on Brooklyn Bridge*, by the Egyptian Ezzedine Choukri Fishere (born 1966), we are led to a different setting yet with some of the same themes. A successful migrant New York University professor, who has left Cairo after losing hope in his country, organizes a gathering of his family and friends for one night after being diagnosed with fatal cancer. In a masterful narrative about their journeys to reach his home in New York, Fishere takes us into the memories of each – from a confused granddaughter who is torn between Cairo and

New York, where her divorced parents separately live, to a distant relative who lives in New York but has become a religious fanatic and expresses sympathy for those who perpetrated the 9/11 atrocities.

The Arab Uprising or Arab Spring literature in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen represents a sense of heightened cultural production across the Arab world. Across the Arab world, there have been ongoing debates about which pre-2011 novels might have predicted the uprisings, and with the rise in works chronicling them, about where to draw the line between literature and reportage. In the rest of the world, readers have often reached to Arabic literature to understand more about recent events. *Waraqaat min daftar al-Khauf* by Abu bakr Al-Ayyadi depicts the sufferings of a Tunisian intellectual in the aftermath of Tunisian Arab uprising. Egyptian Basma Abdel Aziz's 2013 novel *Al-Tabour (The Queue)* navigating difficult moral choices in an unjust world constructs a dystopia vision of an unnamed country, but not unfamiliar to those who have traversed Egypt's urban and political landscapes. *Ajnidatu Sayye al-Ahl* by Ahmad Sabri Abu al-Fatuh, *Al-Araya* by Mahmud Ahmad Ali, *Kaan al-Rais Sadiqi* by Syrian Adnan Farzat, *Madinah lan ta'ud* by Yusuf al-Rifai, *Inqilab* by Mustafa Abid, *La sakakin fi matabikh hazih al-madinah* by Khalid Khalifa, *Adu al-Shams: al-Bahalwan allazi sara wahsh* by Mohammad said al-Raihani, *Al-Qaus wa al-Farasha* by Moroccan Mohammad al-Ash'ary, *Tauq al-Hamam* by Saudi R'ja al-Alam, *Fursan al-Ahlam al-Qatila* by Ibrahim al-Koni, among other works, are worth-mentioning in this sequence. Mohamed Salmawy, president of the Writers' Union of Egypt and secretary general of the General Union of Arab Writers, wrote *Butterfly Wings*. The novel, translated into English by Raphael Cohen, emerges like a butterfly from the chaos of Cairo's Arab Spring, Salmawy constructs a narrative that encompasses both the riots and the disparate lives of three interesting figures: Doha, a fashion designer, Ashraf, a professor and activist politically opposed to Doha's husband, and Ayman who discovers that his father's wife is not his natural mother; hence makes enquiries to track her down. *Butterfly Wings* is therefore a novel of various tales of personal upheaval within the wider, more complex framework of national turmoil.⁸

In the Arab Feminist literary scenario, we have a number of prominent writers such as Moroccan Fatima Mernissi (1940-2015), Egyptian Nawal Sa'dawi (born 1931), Kuwaiti Laila Uthman (born 1943), Palestinian Seher Khalifa (born 1942), Saudi R'ja Abdallah Sani (born 1981), Iraqi Alia Mamdouh (born 1944) and others, with a long list of literary and social works.

In all these novels, the troubles of the Arab world are laid bare. Perhaps local and foreign intelligence that was taken by surprise by the Arab spring should start reading fiction instead of spying on people. In bringing writers together I have sought to showcase writing that engages with the sociopolitical context but is not solely defined by its expectations. Still, the changes of the past five years are written into these authors' lives off the page as well.

Exile, as said by Edward Said,⁹ is never the state of being satisfied, placid or secure. A number of modern and postmodern Arab narratives revolve around displacement brilliantly weaving a tapestry of events and struggles

⁸ See Brownlee, Jason, Masoud, Tarek; Reynolds, Andrew: *The Arab Spring: the politics of transformation in North Africa and the Middle East* (Oxford, 2013)

⁹ Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile* (Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 186

in the lives of Palestinian, Iraqi and Lebanese Diaspora in Europe and Americas, besides some historical displacements that took place in remote past.

The Protagonists of *Seasons of Migration to the North* by the Sudanese Tayeb Saleh (1929-2009), *Wild Thorns* by Sahar Khalifa (born 1941), *Men in the Sun* (1963) and *A World that is not Ours* (1966) by Ghassan Kanafani (assassinated in 1972), *The Broken Mirrors: Sinalco* by Elias Khoury (born 1948 and once a candidate for Nobel Prize), *Embrace on Brooklyn Bridge* by the Egyptian Ezzedine Choukri Fishere (born 1966), *Druze of Belgrade* by Rabee Jaber (born 1972), Susan Muaddi Darraj's *The Inheritance of Exile* (2007), etc, depict displacement agony in the postmodern Arab narrative apogee as to form a collation of allegories and images depicting a plethora of displacement themes personified in diverse roles and personae. *Druze of Belgrade* by Rabee Jaber (born 1972) metamorphoses displacement of Lebanese Druze in Belgrade during last Ottoman days. Arab American Susan Muaddi Darraj in *The Inheritance of Exile* deals with the complexity of issues faced by Palestinian Diaspora in the United States of America.¹⁰

IV.CONCLUSION

The post-modern Arabic fiction in both of its insulin and diaspora incarnations, like its western counterpart, represents a collation of images combining between past, present and future of Arab society, politics and philosophy. The narrative pleads for transformation from an endemically and casually sexist, racist and homophobic society to one that legislates for and promotes equality, among other stereotyped themes of post-modern man in a postmodern world.

Amid cacophony of stark imagery to monologue, graffiti, anecdotes, picaresque and burlesque, Frankenstein's advocacy, Springs and Summers, Gothic and Picassean, real politik, suicide bombing, hugs and blows and virtual *Kamasutra* (a la Saud al-Muzaffar's *Muharramaat*¹¹), mini and meta-narratives, Arab states have never been more in crisis than they are today, whether they have been destabilized by outside intervention, sectarian strife, religious extremism, or the demands of fed-up citizens. The governments' ideologies, which once held out the promise of dignity and advancement, have become threadbare covers for corruption and repression; the specter of their own dissolution is one of their main mobilizing tactics. One can only regret the staggering waste, chaos, and suffering this has entailed. But Arab writers are stitching the pieces back together again; what emerges may not be pretty, but it is already fascinating.

¹⁰ See Salma Khadra Jayyusi, *Modern Arabic Fiction: An Anthology* (Columbia University Press, 2008).

¹¹ Saud Al-Muzaffar, *Al-Muharramaat* (A Trilogy)