

## ON THE QUESTION OF TRADITION IN MODERN SYRIAN PROSE

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In our time, characterized by increasing interest towards the monuments of the world civilization, the problem of the interrelation between the literature of every nation and its artistic past is especially actual.

The Syrian literature is a developed system with thematic, stylistic and expressive variety, which are typical of the contemporary level of the artistic mind. The Syrian literature is characterized by the representation of reality in its national, historical and psychological concreteness. Because of that, the Syrian prose-writers, along with their usage of the newest achievements of world literature, are more and more inclined to look back towards their own literary sources. Some elements, taken from the medieval classical literature and from oral tales, appear in their novels and short stories. These elements are worked out and implemented according to the individual style of every writer.

We must notice that a characteristic feature of the Syrian literature from the earliest period of its formation is its close relation to the historic past and to the traditions. But the approach to it did change with the interrelation and competition between the basic artistic trends, with the development of the aesthetic and ideological views of the men-of-letters.

So, during the 19th century (during the spread of Enlightenment and of the arising of new prose genres), in Syrian literature existed the so-called "conservative" trend. Its representatives propagated a Renaissance of the Arabic Past. They cultivated the old literary forms (beginning with poetry), they strove to make popular the history of the Arabs, in order to awaken their national feelings.

The prominent Syrian public figures and men-of-letters Fransiš Marrāš (1835-1874) and Nuʿmān al-Qasātlī (1854-1920), used the

*maqāma* genre to give an artistic interpretation of their enlightened ideas.

Fransīs Marrāš is the author of "The Pearl of Nacre - concerning the curious aspects of change" (*Durr aṣ-ṣadaf fī ġarā'ib aṣ-ṣadaf*, 1872). It consists of 18 parts and is devoted to love themes. The very title suggests the influence of Classic literature. The composition of the work is also in conformity with medieval tastes. The narrative of the author's love towards the beauty of Sa'dī continues with the history of the two brothers – Sālīm and Amīn. The vivid description of a trip to India carries the reader away to the times of Sindbad and the Caliphate, reminding him of Sheherezade's tales from "A Thousand and One Nights". Peculiar to the author is his use of plot and a system of characters to present his enlightened concepts. The writer criticizes the thoughtless imitation of Europeans, defends women's rights, and talks about the necessity of recognition of marriage for love.

Nu'mān al-Qasāṭlī's works resemble those of Fransīs Marrāš. Since childhood he had the possibility to be in touch with educated persons from Damascus and Beirut, and was interested in European science and culture. Nu'mān al-Qasāṭlī wrote several books: "Interlocutors" (*Anīs wa-Anīsa*, 1881), "The Young Girl Amīna and Her Mother" (*al-Fatāt Amīna wa-ummuhā*, 1880), "Guardian and Temptation" (*Muršid wa-fiṭna*, 1881) etc. Most of the writer's works had been published on the pages of *al-Ġanān* magazine.

The love theme is treated also in Nu'mān al-Qasāṭlī's works. The writer criticizes the early marriages, reveals his thoughts about the necessity of women's education and their equality in society. In the book "The Young Girl Amīna and Her Mother" the author, through his characters, Amīna and her beloved Tābit, expresses his protest against the old customs impeding the happiness of the young. The parents' adherence to traditions brings Amīna and Tābit's love to a tragic end. Nu'mān al-Qasāṭlī's style of narrative is similar to that of Fransīs Marrāš works. His books are also characterized by moralization. But Nu'mān al-Qasāṭlī turns his attention not to a historical or mystic person, but to the living real man, the author's contemporary.

His works are obviously influenced by the ideas of the French Revolution. The call for equality and respect of human personality resounds in all books of this writer.

Another representative of modern Syrian literature is Šukrī al-ʿAsalī (1868-1916), a contributor to *al-Muqtabas* magazine and author of the books "The Calamities of the Miserable" (*Fağā'ir al-bā'isīn*, 1907) and the "The Consequences of Neglect" (*Natā'ig al-ihmāl*", 1913). The writer defines his work "The Calamities of the Miserable" as a "national novel, a novel of manners"<sup>1</sup>. There Šukrī al-ʿAsalī treats actual problems, worrying Syrian society in the beginning of 20th century. He describes in detail the life of his character Sa'īd, representative of the lower middle-class. The failures in his personal life and the social milieu drive him to despair and death becomes the only salvation. In a society, where many social and economic problems have not been solved, a man could not be happy – this is the main idea of the book.

Šukrī al-ʿAsalī's next book, "The Consequences of Neglect", is also devoted to contemporary problems. The preface points that "it has been written for those, who cannot understand the meaning of freedom. The real freedom is one, which serves the progress and welfare of people"<sup>2</sup>. This work sharply condemns the disregard of the national cultural wealth. According to the author, the passion for gambling, dances and fashion clothes is not a sign of freedom of meetings and of education.

Šukrī al-ʿAsalī's works reflect the social relations, prevailing in Syria to the First World War. The writer shows how the new, progressive views win recognition in the fight with the old concepts of culture, freedom, manners and moral.

The above-mentioned works, reflecting various problems of Syrian reality of the time, are characterized by publicistic and didactic features. Sometimes the narrative structure includes numerous digressions of the author into the fields of medicine, philosophy, and music and also

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<sup>1</sup> Ibrāhīm al-Aṭraš, *Ittiğāhāt al-qissa fi Sūriyā ba'd al-ḥarb al-ʿālamīyya t-tāniya*, Damascus 1982, 33.

<sup>2</sup> Muṣṭafā Šākīr, *al-Qissa fi Sūriyā qabl al-ḥarb al-ʿālamīyya at-tāniya*, Cairo 1958, 134.

contain poetic fragments from the *dīwāns* of medieval poets, without being directly related to the basic idea of the work. Gradually Syrian writers give up the traditional *sağc* and try to write in an ordinary and comprehensible language.

The increase of national self-awareness during this period is expressed in the heightened interest in the historical past of their people, not only the history of the Muslim period, but of more distant times as well. The first to treat historical themes are the poets. They glorify the feats of national heroes, their bravery and nobility. Many poems are devoted to the lives of Arab poets (al-Ma'arrī, al-Mutanabbī, etc.).

After poetry, historical themes penetrate into dramaturgy. It is about 1868, when in Damascus takes place the performance of the historical tragedy of "Alexander the Great" by Ibrāhīm al-Ahdab<sup>3</sup>. Later appear plays, devoted to Arab antiquity. They are marked by the influence of European literature (Dumas, W. Scott, Corneille, Racine and many others). Unlike the poetry of that time, play writing does not suffer from excessive idealization of national history. Following European models, the authors try to represent truly the images of the historical characters, and to a certain extent, the historical processes as well.

Along with poetry and play writing, there begins the publishing of historical prose works as well. A notable event in the Syrian literary life of the beginning of this century was the literary activity of 'Abdalmasīḥ al-Antākī (1874-1922) and 'Abdalḥamīd az-Zahrāwī (1871-1916). According to Arab literary historians, they both were the founders of the Syrian historical novel<sup>4</sup>. Using Biblical scenes, 'Abdalmasīḥ al-Antākī made an artistic interpretation of the history of Christianity in his works "The girl from Israel" (*Fatāt Isrā'īl*, 1903) and "Peter the Great" (*Butrus al-akbar*). 'Abdalḥamīd az-Zahrāwī was known as a follower of the Muslim reformers. Under their influence, he wrote the

<sup>3</sup> Z. Arasli, *Giergi Zaidan i arabski istoricheski roman*, Moscow 1967, 40.

<sup>4</sup> Fayṣal Sammāk, *al-Wāq'ā fī r-riwāya s-sūriyya*, Damascus 1979. Adnān b. Zurayl, *Adab al-qissa fī Sūriyā*, Damascus 1966.

novel "Hadīḡa, the Mother of the Faithful" (*Hadīḡa umm al-mu'min īn*, 1908), which deals with events from the early history of Islam.

These works as well as the whole literature of this period are characterized by information, didactic content and artistic recreation of the subject. The characters are schematic, lacking in individual features. The authors do not try to reveal the psychological base of their deeds and historical determination of the characters. Often these are introduced into the plot with the only purpose of a social or moral sermon.

The works of the first Syrian prose writers, in spite of their artistic imperfection, have played a certain part in the formation of modern Syrian prose and its evolution during the following decades.

The future development of the national literature was characterized by a still greater deviation from the traditional norms, by a search for new means and forms of artistic expression. The writers learned a great deal from the foreign (West European and Russian) literature. They mastered so far unknown genres: the short story, the novel, the play; in that they departed further from their own literary traditions.

Along with the overcoming and outliving of the forms and stylistic norms of traditional genres, and the creation of the new contemporary genres, the critical study of the heritage developed with the help of European scientific methods. The activities of the scientific and literary societies have helped the active mastering of the different layers of heritage, and the wide popularization of the monumental pieces of medieval culture. Turning the attention to the study of the problems of language, culture and centuries-old Arab history, they have contributed to the strengthening of patriotic feelings, and after all they have created the conditions for the use of heritage elements for the purposes of artistic enrichment and vitalization of national literature.

During the 30's and 40's, the interest of the Syrians in their cultural heritage and national history increased. It was due to the uplift of the national movement for political and economic independence. But this interest showed itself differently. History, seen through the modern situation, gave the Syrian writers a rich material for expressing the real

needs of their creation: the needs for national consciousness and for national self-determination.

The writers 'Alī at-Taṭawī (b. 1906), Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn al-Munaḡḡid (b. 1918) and Ma'rūf al-Arnā'ūt (1892-1948) tried their pens in the fields of the historical novel. In their work they relied upon the canonized texts: *sīra* and *ḥadīṭ*. In 1940, 'Alī at-Taṭawī published his collection of short stories "From the history of Islam" (*Min at-tārīḫ al-islāmī*). Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn al-Munaḡḡid was the author of the books "In the Palaces of Damascus" (*Fī quṣūr Dimašq*, 1944) and "The Singing Devil" (*Iblīs yuḡannī*", 1943). Ma'rūf al-Arnā'ūt wrote several novels: "The Lord of Qurayš" (*Sayyid Qurayš*", 3 Vols., 1929), "Umar ibn al-Ḥattāb (2 vols., 1932), *Tāriq ibn Ziyād* (1942) and "The Chaste Fāṭima" ("*Fāṭima al-batūl*", 1942). Throwing their glances back towards the long passed events, the Syrian prose-writers idealized the past glory of the Arabs, in order to awaken the spirit of patriotism and free thinking in their contemporaries.

In contrast to the enlightened literature, the authors of these works handle the historical materials more freely. Their historical thinking is more advanced. Depicting the past, they try to relate it to modern times, to find analogies, to follow certain objective laws in the historical development of society.

All this is due to the rise of the general level of historical knowledge, the acquaintance with European studies in Arab and Muslim history and the development of national studies in history, cultural heritage and religion (the texts of the *sīra* and *ḥadīṭ* become the object of scientific study and artistic treatment) on the ground of contemporary scientific methods.

Undoubtedly all these factors had a beneficial influence on the development of Syrian literature, contributing to its uplift in the post-colonial period.

The last few years are characterized by the increasing interest in the traditional artistic values, above all in the works of the medieval classical and folk literature. This interest is due not only to the pursuit of preservation of the cultural and aesthetic heritage, but also to the wish to

master new material of expression. Attempts for using the traditional narrative forms of Arab prose in writing modern novels have multiplied. We can find among the traditional sources a wide range of genres from the folk novel, through the tales of "A Thousand and One Nights", and the *hikāya* to the historical chronicles.

One of the first modern Syrian prose-writers to turn to the cultural heritage was ʿAbdassalām al-ʿUğaylī (b. 1918). In 1963, he published a collection of *maqāmāt*. The tradition of folk poetry can be traced in the short stories of his collection titled "Horses and Women" (*al-Ḥayl wa-n-nisā*) (1965). Legends and folk tales are included in Adīb Naḥwī's novel "Wedding in Palestine" ("ʿUrs Filastīn", 1969); in the works of Fārūq Zarzūr (b. 1926): *Ḥasan Ġabal* (1969), "The Guilty Men" (*al-Mudnibūn*, 1974) and others. Sayings, proverbs, songs are also often to be met. We must notice that the abundance of folk traditions in the poetic structure of these works is one of the characteristic features of modern Syrian prose.

The Syrian prose writers also use the genres of Medieval literature. The form of *hikāya* is used by ʿĀdil Abū Šanab in his short stories: "The Whistle of the Arriving Train" (*Šafir qitār qādim*, 1977) and "The Gloomy Nights" (*Umsiyyāt bāhita ahyānan*, 1977); by Muḥsin Yūsuf (b. 1939) in "The Shadow" (*az-Zill*, 1978) and by Šubḥī ad-Dassūqī in "Sysiphus" (1978). The narrative methods of "Kalīla and Dimna" found their artistic re-interpretation in the short stories of Zakariyyā Šarikī (b. 1940): "The last message from al-ʿAlīq village" (*Āḥīr aḥbār qaryat al-ʿAlīq*, 1979) and by Muḥammad Kāmil al-Ḥaṭīb in "The Dark Green Palm-Tree" (*an-Naḥla al-mudiya*, 1978). The so called "circle" composition (story within a story), so popular in the classical literature, is used in the novel "Arabian Nights" (*Layālī ʿarabiya*, 1980) by Ḥayrī ad-Dahabī (b. 1946). It is also to be found in the works of Fārūq Zarzūr, Ḥannā Mīna (b. 1924), Fādīl as-Sibāʿī (b. 1929), Ḥašīb al-Kayālī (b. 1921) and others.

The above-mentioned works serve as evidence of the deep connection between the modern Syrian literature and the cultural heritage of the Syrian people. If in the first half of this century the main emphasis

in Syrian literature was placed on the more rapid and widest mastering of the genre forms of European fiction, in modern national literature visibly increases the part of narrative elements, borrowed from the Arab-Muslim heritage. The widely used images, motives, structural and compositional forms from the Medieval Classical and Arabic folk literature undoubtedly enrich the Syrian literature in variety of style as well as in variety of genre. They give it expressiveness and a touch of local colour.