

THE MODERN SHORT STORY IN THE SULTANATE OF OMAN¹

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On tackling the subject of Omani artistic prose, in Oman, the western scholar may find himself in an embarrassing position. The Omani man of letters or intellectual will, with rare exceptions, do his utmost to maintain points of view which Arabists and many modern Arab critics have proved groundless. He will be assured that the short story is not a new phenomenon in Arabic literature and arguments previously thought shelved will be used again to support this thesis. He will be told about the short stories from the Qur'ān, the Prophet's *sīra*, about the *Ayyām al-ʿArab*, about *Kalīla and Dimna*, about collections of proverbs, about *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān*. Then there are also the *maqāmāt*, *The Thousand and One Nights*, the Banī Hilāl sagas, and ʿAntara. He will hear about the poetic short story: Imru' al-Qays and his journey to Byzantium, al-Farazdaq and al-Buḥturī will be cited, and so on up to those *qaṣīdas* which are considered the precursors of Omani prose of art; the one of Malik ibn Faham which describes his own death by the hand of his unknowing son; the one of the poetess az-Zahrā' which narrates the banishment of the Abyssinian invaders from the island of Soqatra; continuing up to the *qaṣīda* by an unknown author entitled *Fatāt Nizwā* (The Girl from Nizwa), and the narrative experiences of contemporaries, first of whom is the doyen of Omani poets ʿAbdallāh al-Ḥalīlī, born at the turn of the century, famous for some of his *maqāmāt*². Then there are also the poets Abū Surūr Ḥamīd ibn ʿAbd-

¹ I want to thank the Ministry of National Heritage and Culture and the friends in Oman who allowed me to prepare this paper.

² ʿAlī ʿAbdallāh al-Ḥāliq ʿAlī Ḥasan devotes much space to this "narrative" production of al-Ḥalīlī in his doctorate thesis *Ittiḡāhāt al-adab al-ʿumānī fī l-ʿaṣr al-ḥadīṡ*, dis-

allāh and Salīm ibn ʿAlī al-Kalbānī with their poetic short stories of a social nature. At *an-Nādī al-ġāmiʿī*, the University Club of Qurum, a conference entitled *Tārīḥ al-qissa wa-tatawwuruhā fi ʿUmān* (History and Development of the Short Story in Oman) was held in March 1986, where these and other more pertinent facts about the short story were put forward³ by the Ambassador Ibrāhīm aṣ-Ṣubḥī, Adjunct General Secretary for Political Affairs of the States of the Council of Cooperation as well as literary scholar. For over half the time aṣ-Ṣubḥī discussed the so-called poetic short story claiming, among other things, that this literary genre had its roots precisely in Arabic territory. Only the last third of the conference was dedicated to the modern short story in the Sultanate.

This refusal, which seems to challenge both the modern theories of the short story and the conclusions which orientalists and the more open-minded Arab critics reached some time ago, is not easily comprehended unless one takes into consideration the very particular situation of the Sultanate of Oman, politically and culturally isolated from the world by the reigning sultans right up until 1970. Only with the so-called *intifāda mubāraka*, the blessed upheaval, enacted in that year by the present sultan, Qābūs ibn Saʿīd, (which brought the country from the Middle Ages to the year 2000 in just a few years) has the Sultanate made amazing progress. Even more amazing if one considers the lack, up till now, of serious social unrest. Just a few years

cussed at the Arabic Faculty of the al-Azhar University of Cairo on 25 June 1980. This bulky volume of over 650 pages, after an interesting factual, historical, social and political introduction, goes on to present the literary life of the country in its various forms, giving ample room to poetry in its multiple aspects and trends. In the final section it also gives a panorama of Omani "artistic prose" in the forms of the oration, the epistle and the *maqāma*.

³ Throughout this paper certain place names will be mentioned such as Qurum, Ruwī, Maṭrah, Madīnat Qābūs, and Seeb, which, together with Masqat and other places constitute the district of the capital area, previously called *Mintaqat al-ʿāšima*. A sultanic decree in April 1988 laid down that the whole capital district be known by the name of Masqat.

later a solid base could already be identified towards the realisation of what the Sultan had indicated in his first speech on the 23rd July 1970 after having taken power "I promise you that I shall at the first instance undertake the constitution of a modern government. I shall do what I can to guarantee everybody a happy life and the best future prospects... Yesterday everything was dark but, with God's help, a new day will dawn tomorrow on Oman and its people".

All in all, among the initiatives undertaken, much effort has been devoted to the propagation of education, information and culture to the purpose of conserving the values and traditions of the country. Clearly, from the cultural point of view, it is only in these last years that we have begun to see the effects of this relative opening-up, not only to western cultures, but also to the modern culture of the more evolved Arab countries. In any case, even if works of Arabic fiction are beginning to appear in the literature sections of the bookshops of Ruwī, Maṭraḥ and Madīnat Qābūs, poetry (the literary means whereby the *dād's* language from the time of *gāhiliyya* has found its best expression) still prevails. Of course I am referring to the *ʿāmūdī* poetry, in the most classical *ḥalīlī* tradition⁴. Moreover, the official orientation given by the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, the government institution that publishes most of the literary works produced in Oman, is very clear. While a great number of poetic *dīwāns* have been published, there is not one published work of artistic prose, nor one free poetry *dīwān*⁵.

Obviously where such an atmosphere prevails which we can describe as neither heavy nor constrictive but certainly restrictive, young

⁴ It is revealing that it was actually the students of the university who founded the al-Ḥalīlī ibn Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī Society to organise literary events. So young intellectuals as well continue to see their most solid reference point in tradition.

⁵ This does not prevent an off-shoot of that ministry, as is the Qurum Cultural Club, from organising conferences and free verse poetry readings. The reading given by the Syrian-Lebanese poet ʿAlī Aḥmad Saʿīd, Adonis, on 11th April 1988, was a case in point. It aroused interest but also polemics.

people are not encouraged to leave the beaten track. It follows that the stimuli are either endogenous or arise from out-of-the ordinary situations, usually such as visits abroad, mostly for reasons of study, of which a growing number of young Omanis have availed themselves in these last years. The universities of Kuwait, Iraq, Jordan and Egypt, to mention only the Arab countries where young Omanis mostly turn their quests for culture, increasingly count among their enrolments young people from the Sultanate. And I think it is not a coincidence that all young narrators include on their *curricula* foreign stays and diplomas attained abroad.

The fact remains that we are talking about the exceptions. The norm is attachment to traditional culture, to the classical heritage of Arabic literature, and poetry in particular. With the addition of a fair amount of suspicion towards Western culture, and particularly the Western approach to Oriental studies, often seen as undue intrusion with the aim of minimising and criticising a sphere felt to be personal, belonging just to the Arabs and Muslims. A natural reaction is the frequent dissent which meets the conclusions drawn from the studies by Arabists and Islamists in the various fields of that culture. This attitude is found throughout the Arab and Islam world and we cannot pretend that Oriental studies are completely blameless of having contributed to provoke such marked feeling.

What I have just stated is not remarkable for its news value, and I apologise. But one must bear it all in mind in order to understand the position of the Omani literary man in front of this topic. We must understand the reasons behind it and the justifications.

As I said before, Sultan Qābūs attaches great importance to cultural activities. The Ministry of National Heritage and Culture firstly, but also the Ministries of Information and Education, Training and Youth have undertaken many ventures in this field – literary competitions for young talents, conferences held by personalities from the field of Arab culture, poetry evenings, radio and television debates, cultural supplements in the two national newspapers, *‘Umān* and *al-Waṭan*. A rich opportunity for cultural activities was offered with the opening of

the University Club of Qurum, subsequently named the Cultural Club in 1987, meeting point for young intellectuals. Its facilities include an ample auditorium and a library. Of even greater importance was the foundation, at the Sultan's specific request, of *al-Muntadā al-adabī* (Literary Society) at Seeb, with its halls, gardens, rooms for audiovisual aids, and guest quarters for visiting lecturers.

One of these activities was the afore-mentioned conference held by Ibrāhīm aṣ-Ṣubḥī which I was given the chance of attending and which represented an important moment in the brief history of the modern Omani short story. For the first time this subject was taken from the concerned and displayed before a wider audience. It excited much interest as could be seen from the discussions which arose out of it and which fired the enthusiasm of the Omani press for several weeks afterwards, with the country's major intellectuals and men of letters taking part. One of the authoritative voices raised was that of the Egyptian literary critic and narrator Yūsif aṣ-Ṣārūnī. Since 1983 he has worked in the Sultanate where he is engaged, among other things, on the collection and transcription of folk short stories, especially seafaring short stories⁶.

Omani fiction is thus a recent phenomenon. The first signs date from the sixties with the works of 'Abdallāh aṭ-Ṭā'ī (1927-1973), historian, essayist, poet and pioneer of the historical novel not only in Oman, but throughout the Gulf countries⁷. His two novels - *Malā'ikat al-Ġabal al-aḥḍar* (The Angels of Gebel al-akhdar), Beirut, Maṭābi' al-Wafā', n.d., and *aṣ-Ṣirā' al-kabīr* (The Big Sail), published posthumously at Ruwī in 1981 - are the very first fictional works written by the hand of an Omani and they suffer from lack of previous points of reference even though their author had travelled widely and had come into

⁶ Recently he has published an anthology, *Qiṣaṣ min at-turāt al-'umānī*, Ruwī 1987. His *Sindbād fī 'Umān*, Cairo, came out in 1986 with its short stories of folk traditions and accounts of historical, literary and artistic interest.

⁷ Yūsif aṣ-Ṣārūnī, "*aṣ-Ṣirā' al-kabīr li-'Abdallāh ibn Muḥammnad aṭ-Ṭā'ī wa-riyādat ar-riwāya at-tārīḫiyya al-ḥalī ġiyya*", *al-Muntadā* (of Dubai), V, n. 56 (March 1988), pp. 2-5.

contact with modern fiction in Arab countries. Within certain limits we could compare them with the historical Arab novels which saw the light between the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. This applies particularly to *aš-Širā' al-kabīr* which is set in a decisive moment in Omani history – the period which goes from the start of the Portuguese occupation at the beginning of the sixteenth century, to its end, halfway through the seventeenth century. The characters are portrayed in a simple, superficial way: their personalities are either black or white, devoid of half measures, with neither doubts nor inward conflicts. They live for the present with few memories which flash by. 'Abdallāh aṭ-Ṭā'ī's novels carry an underlying moral lesson, and this is also a recurrent characteristic of the works by the pioneers of the novel and the short story. But we must not be too hard on these first flowers of Omani fiction, but rather try to savour their particular perfumes, one example of which is the recurrent expressions in the local dialect, which give an original fragrance to their *fushḥā*.

While 'Abdallāh aṭ-Ṭā'ī was producing his most important works in the sixties a young secondary school student, on his own initiative, was beginning to lay down his first narrative exercises, naive and haltering, but the first signs of a development which has known no standstill right up to the present day. I refer to Su'ūd ibn Sa'd al-Muzaffar (b. Masqat 1953) who wrote three short stories between 1965 and 1969: *Maw'id fī l-mahatta* (Appointment at the Station), *al-Muntaqim* (The Avenger) and *al-Qadar* (Destiny), which go no further than a mere exercise. In 1968 he received the second prize in a competition organised by the revue *aš-Šarq* of aš-Šāriqa Emirate with his short story *at-Tā'ih* (The Stray), a social and philosophical work where a psychological analysis of a foundling boy having to face society on his own was presented.

In 1970, while still a student at al-Kuwayt University, al-Muzaffar wrote *Iḡāza maradiyya* (Sick Leave), an adventurous love story. On his return to Oman in 1972, the daily newspaper *al-Waṭan* published for the second time *at-Tā'ih* which, in 1973, was chosen to represent the Omani short story at the first Arab Youth Festival in Algiers.

The year 1973 also saw the realisation of two works: *Faylasūf bi-l-bayʿ* (Philosopher for Sale), a short story with a social theme, and *Layla min ʿiṣrīn ʿāman* (One Night Twenty Years On), a play with a social theme in prose and verse which was performed in Masqat.

Throughout the seventies he continued to write and be published in the local press, in particular in the dailies *ʿUmān* and *al-Waṭan*. The former published *Ṣudfatan* (By Chance) and *Ḥayāt rubbamā ḥadīṭa* (Could it be Modern Life?). In this second short story, al-Muzaffar portrays people's contrasting feelings towards the modernisation of life styles following the 1970 revolution. On the one hand they realise its expediency because man needs to progress, but on the other hand opening up a country to external influences without any kind of restriction can have its negative aspects.

Another milestone for the author was *Yawm qabla šurūq aš-šams* (A Day before Sunrise) which was brought out in 1980 as part of an anthology of short stories by young authors. He tried very hard to express aspects of the reality in Oman before 1970, with the customs and traditions that were maintained for the most part even in the subsequent period. This topic is also taken up in *Nihāyat ġīl* (End of a Generation)⁸ and in *Hikāya min qaryatī* (A Story from My Village)⁹.

In 1987 he brought out at Ruwī his first collection entitled *Yawm qabla šurūq aš-šams wa-qīṣaṣ uḥrā*, with nine short stories, seven of which I have cited.

On the whole the works of Suʿūd al-Muzaffar are characterised by their notable social worth and their clear Omani identity, contrary to ʿAbdallāh at-Ṭāʿī's works¹⁰, but in common with almost all the other

⁸ First published in *ʿUmān* in 1977 and subsequently in *al-Waṭan* in 1981.

⁹ Published in *ʿUmān* in 1985.

¹⁰ In *Malāʾikat al-Ġabal al-aḥḍar* the central character is an Iraqi while in *aš-Širāʿ al-kabīr* it is an Indian girl. It has been suggested that the choice of non-Omani principal characters was probably so as not to disturb the susceptible mental attitudes of the general public of that period, who for the most part, would not have accepted the narration of the passion felt by an Omani couple.

young narrators. Particularly in the collection of short stories the recurrence of a sad and pessimistic ending of a romantic nature is noticeable. Crime in the form of murder also appears frequently. But the best pages are descriptive – those depicting the Omani environment, whether urban or rural. One cannot yet affirm that al-Muẓaffar has reached full maturity in his writing. One still stumbles upon ingenuous patches, and the simplicity in the characters' make-up to the point, at times, of incongruity, is recurrent. The characters are mostly portrayed superficially with little real feeling from the heart. However there is evidence of constant progress. His job as a senior government official gives him the chance to travel. He has seen quite a few European countries and come into contact with their cultures. This natural enrichment, his intrinsic curiosity and his ability to elaborate will enable him to reap the benefits in the future.

Even if not as precocious from a literary point of view, Aḥmad Bilāl (b. Barkā, 1951) is of the same generation¹¹. He is perhaps the best known young Omani narrator and is the author of the first collection of modern stories published in the Sultanate, namely *Sūr al-manāyā* (Wall of Destiny), Ruwī 1981. Only a year previously, influenced by the writings of Muṣṭafā al-Manfalūṭī, he had started to write for pleasure, in his time off from his duties as an Air Force Major. Curiously, literary critics seemed to become aware of this work only two years later when his second collection appeared. Actually, *Sūr al-manāyā*, though containing short stories is really a collection of ideas, aphorisms and articles, and on the whole it suffers from the narrative immaturity of its author. The only short story worth considering is the first one, which lends its title to the collection. The realistic orientation of the author is already there and, among other things, we can find interesting descriptions of Masqat in the sixties.

¹¹ He studied in Kuwait and in the Arab Emirates. From 1970 to 1974 he was a teacher, before joining the army where he was made an officer within a year. He obtained a second grade diploma in Education at the Baḥt ar-Riḍā Institute in the Sudan. Since 1983 he has been in charge of the Studies Section of the Army School. He has visited many Arab countries, England, France, India and Pakistan.

A step forward was made with *Wa-ahrağat al-ard...* (And the Land donated...), Ruwī 1983, four short stories that were at once enthusiastically received by the critics. In particular the Egyptian writer and critic ‘Abdassattār Halīf pointed out the capacity of Bilāl to portray particular atmospheres and to analyse characters psychologically at the appropriate, realistic pitch, in a style recalling that of the novel¹², but it was only a year later that the four short stories managed to set the literary circles of Oman astir, causing a lively debate that covered the literary pages of the local press, and contributing to stimulate interest in the *qissa qaṣīra*. The person who touched things off was the young writer Šubbar al-Mūsawī (b. al-Ḥabūra, 1962)¹³, who, in the eagerly awaited first number of the cultural supplement to the daily ‘*Umān*’ which appeared in the summer of 1985, contested the critics’ positive views by claiming that there had been no evolution in Bilāl and that his was an exaggerated realism, with over-detailed descriptions which bored the reader without contributing to the evolvment of the narrated facts. He dwelt on some of Bilāl’s “illogical and banal” endings and gave various examples of the stories’ shortcomings¹⁴. The following week the cultural insert of ‘*Umān*’ printed the replies of Bilāl and other critics who supported him. These took apart, one by one, al-Mūsawī’s criticisms, though agreeing that an occasional stirring-up of the unduly calm waters of literature was a useful exercise.

A story meriting particular attention from this collection entitled *Wa-ahrağat al-ard...* is *Ġarīma taḥta l-mā’* (Crime on the Seabed) – a

¹² ‘Abdassattār Halīf, “*al-Baḥḥ ‘an al-ḥaqīqa fī mağmū‘at Aḥmad Bilāl al-qīṣāṣiyya ‘Wa-ahrağat al-ard...’*”, *al-Uṣra*, 11, 218 (15-11-1984) pp. 52-55 and 219 (1-2-1984) pp. 68-71.

¹³ He studied in Qatar and England. He writes poetry, literary reviews and short stories which, as he himself admits, go no further than a mere literary exercise. In 1986 he published at Masqat, *Ḥarwala bayna l-ḥuzn wa-l-amal* (Raid among Sadness and Hope), aphorisms and articles on various topics of a social and literary bent. “Hot headed” of cultural life in Oman and dissenter of tradition he is nevertheless appreciated for his ability to provoke literary disputes and stimulate discussion.

¹⁴ Cultural insert of the daily ‘*Umān*’ of 11-7-1985.

detective story with a complex plot immersed in a mystery-filled atmosphere. In this story Bilāl successfully captures the moods of the various characters. Right from the opening lines he efficaciously expresses the intimate hurricane in the heart of the unknown person appearing at the beginning of the story and he presents it to the reader in the setting of the atmospheric hurricane in which the action takes place. *Badawī fī Lundun* (A Beduin in London) portrays yet again the Oriental's clash with Western life. In *Ṣawt min al-ard* (Voice from the Earth) Bilāl touches upon the reality of life in an Omani family through the vicissitudes of a widow: the problems she has with her children and her relationship with society. The final story is *Liqā' al-ğabābir fī Bābil* (The Titans meet at Babylon) in which the author boards a ship that takes him back into the past while he tries to analyse the roots of his civilisation and clarify the factors behind the present decline. In his most recent collection *Lā yā ġarīb* (No Indeed, Stranger), Ruwī 1987, Aḥmad Bilāl continues his profitable research into the artistic form of his *qiṣṣa qaṣīra*. Preceded by an erudite analytic preface by the Egyptian Aḥmad Darwīš – lecturer in comparative literature at the Sultan Qābūs University – the five stories demonstrate a further development along the narrative course undertaken by the author. His inclination towards the detective story can be noted, along with his continued investigation of his country's social phenomena rendered in a style which absorbs the reader more and more. His ability to draw an almost tangible outline of the Omani reality also stands out. Among his negative points is his exaggerated use of romantic language in almost every situation without due need. Then there is also the lingering of ingenuousness which shows that Aḥmad Bilāl has still ground to cover, without detracting anything from the value of his work on the whole and from the niche which he has managed to cut out for himself in the brief history of Omani fiction.

After al-Muzaffar and Bilāl, the third member of what can be considered the youthful triad of Omani fiction is Ḥamad ibn ar-Rašīd Rāšid (b. Masqat, 1960). Younger than his colleagues, he is thought by some critics to be the coryphaeus of the third generation of Omani

narrators, a specialist in the *uq̣ṣūṣa*, intended as a very brief short story packed with significance and charm¹⁵.

He made his *début* in the early eighties with *an-Nahla aṣ-ṣagīra* (The Little Palm Tree), in which, in a realistic style, he reaffirms the importance of agriculture for the country. The story has an expressionist ending. Then followed *Laḥẓat duḥf* (A Moment of Weakness), a story about the eternal struggle man has against the sea, with, in the background, the everyday deeds of a coastal village community. After that came *Ḥatmiyyat ar-rahīl* (Fatal Journey), about man's inevitable end along with everything except God. Ḥamad does not neglect the patriotic aspect, portraying a glorious moment of his people in 'Azzām where he relates the extreme sacrifice by the Imām 'Azzām ibn Qays in defending the realisation of his own land. The *uq̣ṣūṣa* won the first prize at the Youth Institution in 1984. Numerous other short stories by this young author followed, all of them printed in the local press but not yet published in volume form. He alternates descriptions of Omani life with aspects of contemporary man's troubles and sufferings. He also tackles the theme of the Arab nation's weakness owing to internal discord, which undermines its unity.

In the early months of 1983, the revue *al-Usra* published a series of short stories by its editor, Ṣādiq al-'Abduwānī (b. Matrah, 1944)¹⁶ which aroused the interest of readers and critics alike on account of the realistic nature, the social content and space devoted to psychological analysis, and the use of symbolism without ambiguity and of irony. However, an over-abundance of ideas tends to interfere with the unfolding of the action. His most interesting *qiṣṣa* is *ad-Dağğāla* (The

¹⁵ Maḥmūd Taymūr in *aṣ-Ṣayḥ al-Ġum'a wa-qiṣaṣ uḥrā*, Cairo 1925, p. *dāl*, note 1, gives to *uq̣ṣūṣa* the meaning that at present is attributed to *qiṣṣa*, and that is, short story. Similarly in Charles Pellat, s.v. *hikāya*, "Encyclopedie de l'Islam", p. 381, one reads that *qiṣṣa* refers to the novel, while the diminutive *uq̣ṣūṣa* implies short story. Here however *uq̣ṣūṣa* means very brief short story.

¹⁶ Having graduated in Kuwait with a thesis of a historical nature, he took up writing in 1974.

Quack), in which he breaks a lance in defence of the local healers for their ability to grasp the psychological bearings of their own people and put it to use in performing 'miraculous' cures, placing doctors who have studied in Europe in difficulty.

After a brief, profitable season, al-ʿAbduwānī ceased writing short stories on account of the increased work load with the revue.

Among the most recent authors of present Omani fiction, we record the collection *Sirāʿ maʿa l-amwāğ* (Struggle against the Waves), Ruwī 1987, by ʿAlī al-Kalbānī (b. Ṣoḥār, 1956)¹⁷, considered a promising début. Here as well the content is mostly of a social nature. He is criticised for his long-winded descriptions, frequent repetitions and for plots which are too simple and at times banal. But his attempts are still a useful inlay in the variagated mosaic of contemporary Omani fiction. There are also signs that things are moving on the female narrative front. Two names have begun to circulate in literary circles: that of a young girl from Masqat, Badriyya aš-Šāhī, and the other is ʿĀʾiṣā al-Nuʿaymī from al-Buraymī. As can be seen from this rapid perspective, the Omani short story's quest for an identity has still some way to go. However, considering the brief period that has passed since the 1970 *nahḍa*, one can only rejoice at the road already covered and at the encouragement and initiative that, coming from the Sultan himself and so on down the scale, are spreading interest in this art form. We look hopefully to the generation that, from birth, has been able to benefit from the new course of the country, whether it be the establishment of mass schooling or study courses abroad. From this generation, alongside al-Muẓaffar, Bilāl, Ḥamad Rašīd, we expect others will come who will raise the Omani short story to the same level as that of those Arab countries which have a longer experience of narrative. Indeed, in some cases it has succeeded in surpassing, in the eyes of the readers, the most princely genre of Arabic literature: poetry.

¹⁷ He studied in Jordan and has travelled in various countries including the United States. At present editor of the revue *Ġund ʿUmān*, he has been writing since 1974.