THE MODERN SHORT STORY
IN THE SULTANATE OF OMAN

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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’an, the Prophet’s sīra, about the Ayyām al-‘arab, about Kalīla and Dimna, about collections of proverbs, about Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān. Then there are also the maqāmāt, The Thousand and One Nights, the Banī Hilāl sagas, and ‘Antara. He will hear about the poetic short story: lmru’ al-Qays and his journey to Byzantium, al-Farazdaq and al-Buḥtūrī 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 Soqotra; 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 ‘Abdallāh al-Halīlī, born at the turn of the century, famous for some of his maqāmāt. Then there are also the poets Abū Surūr Ḥamīd ibn ‘Abd-

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

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-tatawuruhā 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 aš-Šubhī, Adjunct General Secretary for Political Affairs of the States of the Council of Cooperation as well as literary scholar. For over half the time aš-Šubhī 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

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3 Throughout this paper certain place names will be mentioned such as Qurum, Ruwī, Māṭrah, Madīnat Qābūs, and Seeb, which, together with Masqat and other places constitute the district of the capital area, previously called Mintaqat al-ʿāsimā. 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 Ruwāḥ, Mattrah and Madīnat Qābūs, poetry (the literary means whereby the dād’s language from the time of ḡāhiliyya has found its best expression) still prevails. Of course I am referring to the ʿamūḍî poetry, in the most classical ḭârâlî tradition\(^4\). 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 diwāns have been published, there is not one published work of artistic prose, nor one free poetry diwān\(^5\).

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-Ḥālīl ibn Ahmad al-Ḵarāhīdī 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 Ahmad 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 situa-
tions, 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 Qabūs 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-Watan. 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-adabi (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 as-Subhī 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 aš-Šārūnī. 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 at-Tā'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-Ǧabal al-ḥḍar (The Angels of Gebel al-akhdar), Beirut, Maṭābī al-Wafā', n.d., and aš-Širā 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

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⁶ Recently he has published an anthology, Qiṣas min at-turāq al-ʿumānī, Ruwī 1987. His Sindbād fi ʿUmān, Cairo, came out in 1986 with its short stories of folk traditions and accounts of historical, literary and artistic interest.

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-Sirāʿ 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 at-Tāʿī’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 fushā.

While ‘Abdallāh at-Tāʿī 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 Suʿūd ibn Saʿd al-Muṣaffar (b. Masqat 1953) who wrote three short stories between 1965 and 1969: Mawdīd fī l-maḥaṭṭa (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-Tāʿīb (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-Muṣaffar wrote Iǧāza marādiyya (Sick Leave), an adventurous love story. On his return to Oman in 1972, the daily newspaper al-Waṭan published for the second time at-Tāʿīb 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-bay‘* (Philosopher for Sale), a short story with a social theme, and *Layla min ʿîsrīn ʿâman* (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-Wāṭan*. The former published *Sudsfatan* (By Chance) and *Ḥayāt rubbamā ḥadīta* (Could it be Modern Life?). In this second short story, al-Muẓaffar 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 *Yaum 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 *Nibāyat ḡil* (End of a Generation)⁸ and in *Hikāya min qaryatī* (A Story from My Village)⁹.

In 1987 he brought out at Ruwā his first collection entitled *Yaum qabla šurūq aš-šams wa-qisās uhrā*, with nine short stories, seven of which I have cited.

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

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⁹ Published in *ʿUmān* in 1985.

¹⁰ In *Malam‘ikat al-Ṭabar al-abdar* the central character is an Iraqi while in *as-Shirā‘ 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-Muzaffar 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, Āḥmad 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 Baḥīṭ 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-ahraqa'at al-ard*... (And the Land donated...), Ruwi 1983, four short stories that were at once enthusiastically received by the critics. In particular the Egyptian writer and critic Abdassattár Halif pointed out the capacity of Biláal 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 *qiṣṣa qasīra*. The person who touched things off was the young writer Subbar al-Músawi (b. al-Habūra, 1962)¹³, who, in the eagerly awaited first number of the cultural supplement to the daily *Umán* which appeared in the summer of 1985, contested the critics’ positive views by claiming that there had been no evolution in Biláal and that his was an exaggerated realism, with over-detailed descriptions which bored the reader without contributing to the evolvement of the narrated facts. He dwelt on some of Biláal’s “illogical and banal” endings and gave various examples of the stories’ shortcomings¹⁴. The following week the cultural insert of *Umán* printed the replies of Biláal and other critics who supported him. These took apart, one by one, al-Músawi’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-ahraqa'at al-ard*... is *Čarima tahta l-mā*’ (Crime on the Seabed) — a

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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, *Harrwala bayna l-huzn 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 *Umán* 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 fi Lundun (A Beduin in London) portrays yet again the Oriental's clash with Western life. In Șawī 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 fi 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 garīb (No Indeed, Stranger), Ruwī 1987, Ahmad Bilāl continues his profitable research into the artistic form of his qīṣṣa qasīra. Preceded by an erudite analytic preface by the Egyptian Ahmad Darwiš - 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 ingenuity which shows that Ahmad 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-Muţaffar and Bilāl, the third member of what can be considered the youthful triad of Omani fiction is Hamad ibn ar-Rašīd Rašīd (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 uqsūsa, intended as a very brief short story packed with significance and charm. He made his début in the early eighties with an-Nahla as-sagīra (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 Lahzat duʿaf (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 Ḥaimiyyat ar-raḥīl (Fatal Journey), about man’s inevitable end along with everything except God. Hamad does not neglect the patriotic aspect, portraying a glorious moment of his people in ʿAzzām where he relates the extreme sacrifice by the Imām ʿAzzām ibn Qays in defending the realisation of his own land. The uqsūsa 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-Utra published a series of short stories by its editor, Šādiq al-ʿAbduwānī (b. Mātrah, 1944) 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 qīṣa is ad-Dagğala (The

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15 Maḥmūd Taymūr in aš-Šayb al-Qumā wa-qīṣa waḥrā, Cairo 1925, p. dāl, note 1, gives to uqsūsa the meaning that at present is attributed to qīṣa, and that is, short story. Similarly in Charles Pellat, s.v. hikāya, “Encyclopedie de l’Islam”, p. 381, one reads that qīṣa refers to the novel, while the diminutive uqsūsa implies short story. Here however uqsūsa 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-‘Abduwānī 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 Sirā’ ma‘a l-ammāq (Struggle against the Waves), Ruwān 1987, by ‘Alī 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 aṣ-Ṣāḥī, and the other is ‘Ā‘īsa al-Nu‘aymī 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 nahda, 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 Raṣīd, 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 Gwand ʿUmān, he has been writing since 1974.