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 tarham (Merciless Hearts), which was published at the end of the 1960s, was ʿAbd-Allāh Saqr Ahmad. He also wrote at the same time the first collection of short stories in the history of Emirate literature. It was entitled al-Ḥašāba (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 (Multaqa1 15).

The first literary attempts of the young generation of Emirate writers were published within the pages of the following periodicals: an-Nasr, az-Zamālik, aṣ-Ṣabāb, al-Aḥlī. 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-ITTihād, the weekly Abbār Dubay and the monthly al-Maǧma2. 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-Ǧazāʾ (Punishment), Daḥṭyyat at-tamaʾ (The Victim of Greed), Ǧahim (Hell), Hādī baswa al-ḥubb (Such is Love) or Lasy bilā ʿahir (Night without End), Muhammad ʿAlī al-Μirī – the author of the short stories Yawm fi hayāt muwawwaf saġīr (A Day in the Life of an Ordinary Civil Servant) and ʿAbīr sabīl (The Traveller), ʿAbdul-azīz ʿalīl – from whose pen came the short story Min aḍligi waladī (For My Son) as well as ʿAbdalhamīd Ahmad – author of works such as al-Farār (Escape) or Half al-bāb al-μuġlaq (Behind Closed Doors) (Multaqa1 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-ITTihād, al-Faṣr, al-Wadha published in Abu Dhabi, al-Beṣīn published in Dubai or al-Ḥalīf 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 al-Saqā' (Labour) written by ‘Abdallāh āzīz as-Sarhān 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 Sā‘īn ‘Ālī and ‘Abdulqādir Ahmad Nūr made their debut publishing their works within the pages of Abhār Dubay and al-Abli.

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-arabīyya 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-‘Hurrī ālā wa‘īm al-qabīla (Breaking Out of the Tribal Tradition) written by Muhammad Hasan al-Harbī, as-Sīlahā fi ‘aynay bālīq yatammahhī (Bathing in the Eyes of the Wild Gulf) by ‘Abdallāh Ahmad, Dālīka v zamān (Those Times), Zalāt al-‘adīrī (The Mistakes of the Maidens) by ‘Abdarrīdā as-Ṣa‘wānī, Hākki mīn navār abār (A Different Kind of Love), al-Fursa al-‘ahīra (Last Chance) and Sādiqī (Friendship) written by Muhammad al-Murr.

According to Dr. ‘Abdī as-Sādiqī 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 (as-Sādiqī 1989:153-154).

‘Abdallāh Ahmad 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 Saqī and his collection of short stories al-‘Haša (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 (as-Sādiqī 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 dhows and the small districts, describing the contemporary subjects of the construction of ships and the work of a ship and his crew, the main hero being the captain, which is depicted in the cloth of the divar.

A story about a group of the inhabitants of the city of Ras al-Azayy (Advice for the Children) with the main hero Ibn Zuhair.

Colonialism throughout the Emirates is the subject of ‘Abdī as-Sādiqī’s novel I Feel Alive (I feel alive) which is an unfinished history.

The country’s natural disasters, the Ḥarrād (Locusts) which accidentally were scattered by the wind and famine, Sīlah wa‘īm (Our Water) a story of a child who has a water holder for irrigation which contains a message to come to the ‘Azmina.

The discovery of oil and the culture of the Emirates is also the subject of ‘Abdī as-Sādiqī’s work (as-Sādiqī 1989:179).

Prior to the discovery of oil the fact that the world was left behind this tradition, which was the life of the people. And the novel al-‘Abhār as-Sa‘īl (Sea’s Lover) is set in the life of a diver who uses the creature to understand the language of the small street cafes.

In another short story (Sea’s Lover) describes the life of the people in the present, a man who is a sailor and works at sea.

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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 (as-Sadiqi 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 ‘Ālīq al-bahr (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 Nasīr Šubrān entitled as-Sayyid geyr masjūd (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

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 ʿAlī Muhammad Rāṣid in the short story Riḍāl fi miṣna (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 Saʿīd Sulīm al-Hanki’s work entitled ʿAbdallāh (as-Sagir ...) (Advice for Little ‘Abdallāh) 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 ṭahsu bihi annabu yā ḳīsu (The Day I Feel Alive in) written by棕色 al-Fayruz. 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-Gaqqād (Locusts) by Nasīr Aẓ-Zahiri. 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. Śudda wa-taṣṣil (The Distress Which Passes) written by Nasīr Šubrān 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.

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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 *Tafsīla wa hulm al-qabila* (Childhood and the Dreams of the Tribe) by the female writer Suʿād al-ʿArīmī. 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.

Saʿīd al-Ḥankī in the short story *Humūm al-muwātin* 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 guls apart.

Muḥammad Ḥasan al-Ḥarbī presents in the short story entitled *Wisām ẓaraf* (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 *Buṣrā fī s-sittīn* (Bushra is Sixty) from the pen of ‘Abdarrıda as-Sağwānī 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.

‘Abdalhamīd Ahmad in the short story *al-Baydār* (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. Mariş 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 Nāṣir 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 *Hāḍā l-wa’qīb laysa li* (The Face is Not Mine) by Su’ād al-‘Arımi. 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’ (as-Sadīqi 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 Matār Yūṣuf, Laylā Ḍhāmīd, Maryam Gāmāḍ Fārāğ or Amīnā 'Abdallāh Būshāb.

Salmā Matār Yūṣuf 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 'Uṣba (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-Naṣīḍ (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 Matār Yūṣuf'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-dūd (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-dūd (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 unexplained. Salmā Maṭār Yūsfī 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 Ahmad, who is considered to be a representative of a symbolic current. The language of symbols dominated the collection of short stories al-Hayma, al-mabraḡān, 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 dependent 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 behavior 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 Ahmad entitled Hāfrāqa (Alert).

Laylā Ahmad’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 Ġama’a Faraq presents in his short stories various aspects of the new reality in the Emirates. In his collection entitled Fayruz (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-Zawwāyā al-arba’a (Four Corners) the hero is driven to ruin or even to death as in the short story Sāliḥ al-Mubārak (Blessed Salih). In the short story ar-Rīḥ (The Wind) Maryam Ġama’a Faraq presents us with two human attitudes: the first subjected to nature and the second totally dependent on the help of others.

Anwar al-Ḥaṭib 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 Šūṭur (Feelings), several short stories contain symbolic elements, for example Sāliḥ al-

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Mubārak (Blessed Salih), often an important role is played in them by memory as can be seen in the works Gufūl (Fear) or Bidāya (The Beginning) (al-Ḥāṭib 1989:99-100). The writer Amīna ʿAbdallāh Būshān describes in her works society as the carrier of disease. In its present stage one cannot distinguish its symptoms. The short story entitled Zahīra ḥāmiya (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 Mahra (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 Būshān 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 Hayyāq (Excitement) from the collection An-naṣīd (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 ḥāmiya (Hot Afternoon) and Mahra (The Mare). The most important feature of Amīna ʿAbdallāh Būshān’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 Rāṣid ʿAbdallāh entitled Shābinda (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 yahbat 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. Muhammad ʿUbayd Gābās undertook an attempt at a psychological novel. This is entitled Daʿīman yahdū fi l-layl (It Always Happens at Night). The author analyses the agitation and psychological problems of the heroes: Hālid, Sālim al-Māḡīd, Ahmad Nāṣir and Fāṭima Nāṣir. 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 waz-zāhrā (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.
REFERENCES


Multaqā1 = al-Multaqā al-awwal li-l-kitāb al-qasāsiyya wa-r-riwayiyya fi dawlat al-


Multaqā2 = Multaqā at-lāni li-kitāb al-qasāsiyya wa ar-riwayiyya fi dawla al-imārāt al-


151-219, part I.