

ARABIC NOVEL BORN SATIRICAL

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ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that many researchers have traced back the development of the Arabic Novel, little attention is paid to the critical tone that characterizes this genre since its outset. This paper, although it explores the emergence and development of Arabic fiction, its primary concern is to textually trace and analyse the interrelation of society and fiction showing how changes in society are being contextualised in fiction, and thus, how themes and narrative techniques of the genre develop accordingly. In this sense, I would argue that a critical concern for social affairs constitutes an essential aspect of the Arabic novel, since the initial stages of its appearance. The analysis shows that satire appears to be an essential feature of this genre, as the novel is intended to teach and enlighten the public rather than merely to entertain them. But before delving into further analysis of the use of satire in the Arabic novel, I shall first focus on the emergence of the genre.

Keywords:

Arabic novel, social satire, Arabic literature, Sixties Generation, Zaynab, development, genre

THE RISE AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE ARABIC NOVEL:

The emergence of modern Arabic fiction in general, and the novel in particular, happened over many years. But a continuous flow of novels of any literary merit, or a fair degree of technical competence, does not become apparent until nearly a hundred years later, around the 1940s (Jad, 1983, p. 1). Nevertheless, almost all critics consider *Zaynab* (1913) by Muhammad Husayn Haykal to be the first fairly accomplished novel that departed from the traditional form of *maqama*¹, and the first novel which was inspired by regional Egyptian nationalism (Jad, 1983, p.11). Paul Starkey (2006) observes that *Zaynab* is considered to be a focal turning point in the development of the Egyptian and Arabic novel: to him, *Zaynab* “represents a major advance in Arabic novelistic technique” (p.102). The significance of this work as a full-fledged novel is further stressed by Samah Selim who states that *Zaynab* “offers an original inscription of a fully developed and autonomous narrative subject the essential foundation on which a variety of European versions of the history of the novel have been constructed” (2004, p.103).

Thus, it was in 1913 that Haykal proposed a dramatic new departure from old formless literary categories towards a more distinguished and well-constructed shape, the novel. Robin Ostle (1991) compares *Zaynab* to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), in the sense that *Zaynab* significantly reflects class and rural life in Egypt (“The Arab World”, p. 104-5). According to Ostle (1991), *Zaynab* incorporates all of the classic elements of European models: long, sustained idylls about the Egyptian countryside, episodes of romantic passion, the struggle to adhere to the accepted pattern of social virtue as opposed to following one’s natural,

¹ Maqama is a sort of narrative form, which was popular in Arabic literature until the beginning of the 20th century. Hadith Isa Ibn Hisham by al-Muwaylihi (1907) is considered by many critics to be the closest to European narrative tradition of the novel.

instinctive, inclinations. However, as Ostle claims, the real significance of this novel lies not so much in its intrinsic literary qualities, but in the fact of its existence and the subsequent patterns which it established in Egyptian fiction throughout the 1920s and the 1930s. Significantly, Ostle identifies pastoral and satire as important elements in *Zaynab*, which were crucial to the subsequent development of creative prose writing for the next three decades, with the two elements expressing the aspirations and the revulsions of Haykal's time (p.105). But despite *Zaynab* paying particular attention to the harsh and unjustified traditions among the rural classes in Egypt, a romantic element seems to dominate the long sustained passages of idyllic description of scenes of the Egyptian countryside. Nevertheless, Haykal's *Zaynab* critically introduces a vivid portrait for marriage traditions in Arabic society, particularly Egypt.

In this respect, *Zaynab* was undoubtedly avant-garde for its time. Haykal's lead was followed by Ibrahim al-Mazini, Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad, Taha Husayn and Tawfiq al-Hakim, who wrote and published a number of novels, appearing from the mid-1920s through to the 1940s. The plots of novels such as al-Mazini's *Ibrahim al-Katib* (1925-26) or al-Aqqad's *Sara* (1938) are full of romantic adventures involving the central characters, which are proceeded by a series of unconvincing coincidences, and which come extremely close to the world of facile escapism provided by popular romantic magazines, indicating that romance and passion were significant characteristics of Arabic novels during this period. Al-Aqqad's *Sara* (ibid.), for example, revolves around the passionate love between Sara, in her twenties, and Hammam, in his late thirties; the novel reveals that while Hammam is deeply in love with unfortunate Sara, he never attempts to understand her problems, nor even thinks of marrying her. Their relationship is totally sensual. Though he tells her of his love, he never shows his love in action. Though essentially romantic, the novels of this period are autobiographical in nature, which reflect the authors' own life and experiences. Taha Husayn's *al-Ayyam* (1933), for instance, which many critics consider his masterpiece, and a major contribution to prose literature during this period, is nothing but a famous autobiography (Allen, 1994, p. 36, Moosa, 1997, p. 292). The first part of *al-Ayyam* covers Husayn's life up to the age of thirteen, when his family sent him to study at al-Azhar Mosque, a religious institution established in the Fatimid era. It contains a detailed, passionate portrayal of the life and society of the author in his village in Upper Egypt. According to Allen, the use of the third person in the novel "lends an element of fictionality even to these personal memories, and this is aided by both the insights into the young boy's motivations and also by the tone of gentle irony which pervades the entire work" (1994, p. 36). Moreover, Taha Husayn's later novels, particularly *Shajarat al-Bu's* (1944), are also very significant contributions to the genre.

However, many critics consider *Awdat al-ruh* (1933) by Tawfiq al-Hakim to be the first novel which succeeds in painting a convincing portrait of a family within a very restricted environment. In *Awdat al-ruh*, we are introduced to Muhsin, a young student living with his relatives in Cairo. Like his father, Husayn comes from a peasant background. His father marries a woman from a rich powerful Turkish class, hoping to climb socially. But his arrogant and bombastic wife constantly reminds him that he is an uncouth *fallah* whom she works hard to civilise, and she treats with equal harshness and contempt the peasants who work on her estate. Muhsin then deeply feels in love with Saniyya, the beautiful seventeen-year old daughter of a retired physician. His love is agitated by his wild imagination, evident in the way Muhsin holds and kisses Saniyya's handkerchief. What is significant is that the love story does not deny the social reality it depicts, but functions as a platform to satirise certain social ills. Like *Zaynab*, irony and romance are carefully interwoven to reflect, as well as to criticise, social reality. Matti Moosa considers *Awdat al-ruh* (ibid.) as "a work of social realism, marked by mordant humour, revealing the loves, joys, and sorrows of a middle-class Egyptian family" (ibid., p. 305). Nevertheless, in spite of the great contribution made by great thinkers like Taha Husayn, al-

Aqqad and Tawfiq al-Hakim, it is perhaps Naguib Mahfouz who has written the most in novel form and who has earned the widest repute. Roger Allen (ibid.) considers Mahfouz the most prolific and successful novelist of the "Generation of 39". Allen confirms that "he [Mahfouz] is without doubt the Arab world's most illustrious novelist...His earlier works, of which *The Trilogy* may be considered the culmination at that time, were avidly read" (p. 55).

Apart from the romantic trend that flourished during this period, the historical novel played an important role in Arabic literature, with its combined purpose of educating and entertaining, during the general process of *nahda*, involving a rediscovery of the classical heritage and a reassertion of national identity. Moosa (ibid.) states that the Lebanese writer Butrus al-Bustani (1819-1883) was the first author to set the foundation of the Arabic historical novel in 1871, but adds that it was the Syrian writer Jurji Zaydan (1861-1914) who later popularised Arab history in fictional form; he also notes that Zaydan's historical novels are broader in scope than al-Bustani's (p.185). This historical trend continued to exist even after the appearance of the romantic phase; Allen considers al-Hakim's *Awdat al-ruh*, discussed above, to be a clear expression of history, which reflects the increasing awareness of historical roots among authors (p. 66). Furthermore, Moosa makes the assumption that *Awdat al-ruh* symbolises the history of Egypt and its people since pharaonic times: like their ancestors, they are a cohesive social unit; and despite seeming passive, they prove to be men of action when inspired by revolution (p. 308).

More importantly, both Allen and Moosa stress the function of the historical novel as a tool of social criticism. According to Allen (ibid.), many writers produced historical novels set in both ancient and medieval times, as well as during the interwar period (1918-1939) and in the 1940s, although this particular type of novel has suffered a significant decline since that time. Modern Arab writers continue to make use of history in their fictional works, reflecting certain periods in the history and development of modern Arabic culture. However, the purpose is no longer merely to entertain, but to use the past to illustrate and stress a moral code for present and future generations. Jamal al-Ghitani, for instance, uses texts from a historian of the Mamluk period in his novel *Al-Zini Barakat* (1976). His intention is to deliver sardonic and highly critical commentary on civil liberties in Egypt in the 1960s and 1970s, rather than to put the event of several centuries earlier into a more palatable form. The historical trend was followed by the romantic, with Haykal's *Zaynab* marking the beginning of the romantic phase. This trend remained extremely popular until recently.

However, as Allen observes, the Arab socio-political landscape has changed tremendously in the past few decades; it is natural, therefore, that the novel has been called upon to fulfil a role which it performs better than any other literary genre that of serving as a mirror and critic of the society within which it is conceived (Ibid., p. 63). Matti Moosa (ibid.) notes that in the interwar period, Arabic fiction underwent substantial changes in both its themes and its techniques. The former at least can definitely be attributed to the social and political upheavals in the region. In this period, there arose strong nationalistic feelings and a movement for political independence, accompanied by cultural upheavals which affected many facets of Arab life, especially in Egypt. The revolution of 1919 symbolised the Egyptian national struggle for political, social, and economic freedom and independence. It focused attention on the reality of Egyptian life: Egypt was seeking its real identity and was moved by the desire to take its rightful dignified place in the community of nations. Such social and political changes have been very much reflected in its fiction. According to Moosa, Egyptian writers, under the influence of such an atmosphere, laboured seriously to create an indigenous fiction which would 'realistically' reflect Egyptian characteristics, since romantic fiction was too outlandish and unreal a vehicle to portray life in Egypt. There was a need for a new literature based on real human actions in daily life, portraying society as realistically as possible,

thereby regarding the romantic outlook of their predecessors as outmoded. Among the pioneers of the new realism were Isa Ubayd, Mahmud Timur, and Mahmud Tahir Lashin (*ibid.*, p. 266).

Thus, Arabic fiction took a new turn during the 1930s, from the romantic treatment and the psychoanalysis of characters to realism, based on the interaction between characters and society. This trend culminated in the works of the Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz. This new trend concerned itself with the social predicament of the poor and the downtrodden, and with the impact of social and moral dictates on their life and behaviour, intended to showcase the faults of society through the actions and behaviour of the characters. Moosa observes that Egyptian writers during this period were intent on “creating a genuine Egyptian literature with Egyptian characteristics, but they used Western techniques,” adding that students at the Egyptian University called for the creation of a genuine Egyptian writing that would realistically portray the farmer in his field, the businessman in his store, the prince in his palace, the scholar among his books and students, etc. They wanted a literature that would realistically depict Egyptian life and identity, but not one that was modelled on Western art (*ibid.*, p. 281-2). Hence, with the realistic trend of the 1940s, the Arabic novel ultimately stood on its own as a significant Arabic literary genre. As Ostle notes, “With the 1940s the novel in Arabic finally comes of age, and it does so in a setting which is urban”, adding that the transition from romantic trend to nightmarish vision of social reality is clearly illustrated in novels based on life in the city (“The Arab World”, p. 113).

In general, as Allen (*ibid.*) observes, the current state of the genre of the novel within this broad geographical expanse suggests that while the fortunes of certain national traditions may fluctuate in accordance with political and social circumstances, “the genre as a whole continues to fulfil its function as a reflection of the variety and complexity of contemporary life in the region” (p. 163). As Ali Muhsin Jassim notes, the modern Arabic novel development is governed by the social and political changes that very much “influence and control the lives of individuals and societies”, adding that “the changes and problems experienced by Arab society are reflected in the novels produced” (1983, p. 67-70). Recently, novels have become more concerned with the portrayal of groups of people in their struggle with the changes of life in Arabic society today. As we noticed in the realistic tradition of the 1940s, the period of the late 1950s and 1960s saw an increasing tendency among many Arab novelists to concentrate more on the individual in his social environment. Jabra Ibrahim Jabra notes that the focus has shifted from an investigation of society and its conflicts, to another kind of complex maze, that of the inner self of man as novelists explore the secrets of his conscience using the techniques of modern psychology on the scientific plane, and stream-of-consciousness and interior monologue on the more literary level (cited in Allen, 1994, p. 14).

The 1960s emerged then as a period when the different revolutionary regimes in the Arab world moved from the initial flush of success which independence and its consequences had brought, towards a process of formulating some of the ideological values on which the revolution had been or was to be based, and of putting such values into practice. The following section throws some light on the state of the Arabic novel during this period.

SIXTIES GENERATION: THE SEARCH FOR A NEW FORM

As a matter of fact, the Arab world, particularly Egypt, witnessed tremendous social, economic, and political changes, during the 1960s and afterwards. Hence, the political climate as well as the socioeconomic instability of the period invariably shaped the works of the authors of this period, who came up with new horizons in Arabic creative art in order to cope with the new developments in the region. In other words, two important factors significantly influenced Arabic novelists, and therefore, the art of fiction. The first and foremost is a social factor, which encompasses both social and political transformations. The second is pertaining to the need to go beyond the realistic tradition as a mode to express new themes arising from these socio-political aspects. Mehrez notes that this period “witnessed the emergence of a new literary breed that launched considerable changes in the literary forms, techniques, and the language that was to depict the contradictions and confusions of the sixties” (1994, p.13). For Mehrez, a new image of the artist, that of a ‘revolutionary producer’ became central to the literary field. She seems to suggest that the writers of this period were active participants in cultivating the public opinion of the significance of social reformation. Mehrez also stresses the importance of thematic as well as technical changes in fiction during this period to express revolutionary ideas.

What is at stake here is that satire became a mode of expression best suited to express these revolutionary ideas, which not only reflected public dissatisfaction with current social affairs, but also functioned as a tool of enlightenment. The narrative of Egyptian fiction, according to Muhsin Jassim al-Musawi (2003), is mostly engaged in the ramifications of nation, ethnicity, class, and gender where “the politicised state jargon of achievement, has become the butt of satire since the 1967 Israeli defeat of the nation state” (p. 33). For him, while the narratives “may build on conflict, such as class struggle or national liberation struggle, the basic patterns are ironic” (p. 162). Thus, al-Musawi puts much emphasis on the satirical treatment of the narratives during this period, noting that writers had to cope with the new situation “through parody, irony, travesty and humour” (p. 162). In her article, *In Quest of New Narrative Forms: Irony in the Works of Four Egyptian Writers*, Ceza Qasim Draz, further claims that the “Young Writers or the Writers of the Sixties” have declared themselves as a “fatherless generation” in the sense that they have revolted against Mahfouzian realism. Draz’s argument focuses on what she referred to as the “dominant”. According to her, the evolution of the narrative form witnessed a “shift in the ‘dominant’ from the mimetic approach of modern social realism, to an ironical metafictional approach in the writing of narrative” (1981, p. 137). For her “irony has ... become the main structural principle which governs the works of ‘the Writers of the Sixties’” (p. 138).

Paul Starkey (2006), further notes that many of these writers shared a number of characteristics, both in terms of attitude and experience. Most were politically committed, but usually in a more outspoken way than the more optimistic generation of al-Sharqawi. Their work is characterised by a mood of rejection, disillusion and self-doubt rather than optimism. Starkey observes that many of these writers:

“Had been, or still were, avowed Marxists, and many, again like [Sonallah] Ibrahim, had been imprisoned for their political views. At the same time, their self-doubt was combined, in the case of the best writers at least, with a powerful desire to find a new literary orientation for themselves, redefining the role of the writer in Arab society and allowing them to express the attitudes and feelings of the new generation (p. 139-40).”

Starkey, while emphasising the views of Mehrez, al-Musawi and Draz goes further to suggest that the writers of this 'Generation of the Sixties' created their own distinguished "literary orientation" to express their attitudes and feelings, as a reaction against not only the social and political deterioration of Arabic society Egyptian society in particular but also against traditional modes of writing fiction (p. 140). Indeed, Starkey's view takes us back to the 1950s British authors whose work characterized by bewilderment and confusion as a sense of breakdown of social values. Those writers turn their hatred towards the socio-political system, using their works to express their angry tone and have strongly attacked and criticized the existing situation.

Like the post-World War II British novelists the so-called 'angry young men' the 'Generation of the Sixties' Arab novelists, suffered from a sense of confusion and dissatisfaction with contemporary social and political affairs. The welfare state failed to bring reformation or development to society, causing these writers to lose faith in life in general, viewing it as ultimately useless and meaningless. Hence, disillusionment and alienation were common topics in Arabic literature of the 1960s, a period in which the ideals and high hopes of the Egyptian Revolution of 1952 gradually turned out not to have been realised. A process of fundamental realignment took place, reinforced by the defeat in the Six-Day War in 1967. Halim Barakat argues that:

"Contemporary Arab writers have been pre-occupied with themes of struggle, revolution, liberation emancipation, rebellion, alienation. A writer could not be a part of Arab society and yet not concern himself with change. To be oblivious to tyranny, injustice, poverty, deprivation, victimisation, repression, is insensitively proper. I would even say that writing about Arab society without concerning oneself with change is a sort of engagement in irrelevances (cited in Allen, 1994, p. 63)."

SOCIO-CRITICAL MOOD OF ARABIC NOVEL

Critical tone does appear to be an important aspect which links almost all the varieties of Arabic novels discussed above. Tracing back the chronological development of the Arabic novel through the historical, the romantic and the realistic traditions, will show that many of these novels include bitter humour directed towards certain aspects of social life. That is to say, satire appears to be an essential component of the Arabic novel from the outset. For instance, *Zaynab*, the very first novel in Arabic fiction, though romantic in nature, strongly attacks less desirable marriage traditions practiced in rural areas. Satire, in other words, constitutes an important aspect of *Zaynab*: while the theme of love predominates the novel, it also carries a very serious social message. It criticises, according to Selim (2004), "the oppressive chain that binds the landless labourer to the wealthy landlord" (P. 116). Much of the satirical stance of the novel is introduced through the character of Hamid, whose "criticism of the traditional, feudal relationship between landlord and peasant is part and parcel of his total rebellion against the old social and moral order" (Selim, *ibid.*, p.116). His critical attitude is an obvious mask to ridicule the social system, as well as to expose the absurdity of oppressing the peasants:

"I have now made up my mind though I am ashamed of this confession that in spite of the many grave faults I had found with social milieu to which I belong, I still regard the classes that we have oppressed with idle pride. And If I had once found men from amongst the peasantry whose appearance,

speech and charm pleased me, and women who are no doubt more lovely, polite and intelligent than most of the girls of other classes, I now feel that there are divisions between the classes difficult to bridge (cited in Selim, *ibid.*, p. 116).”

Furthermore, Ostle (*ibid.*) considers the use of dialogue and humour by al-Mazini as a vital element and a significant technical advance (“The Arab World”, p. 110). Ostle’s view is also shared by M. M. Badawi, who notes that “humour and irony,” common in the earlier works of al-Mazini, made it delightful reading: like Zaynab, al-Mazini’s Ibrahim al-Katib deals primarily with love, but also exposes and criticises the negative aspects of marriage customs in Egypt (1985, p.137-151). Moreover, *Yawmiyyat Na’ib fi’l- Aryaf* (Diary of a Country Lawyer, 1937) by al-Hakim is another well-crafted novel that is characterised by a significant change. For Ostle, the romance and passion in this novel is replaced by bitter satire condemning the folly of applying laws to peasants who are totally ignorant of them. The critical stance that al-Hakim seems to take in his literary work is also very much present in his novel *Awdat al-Ruh*, as discussed above. Considered an allegory, *Awdat al-Ruh* glorifies the Egyptians’ revival from the hegemony of British colonisation. As Ostle notes, the satirical humour with which writers like al-Mazini and al-Hakim pepper their works in the 1920s and 30s has very much influenced their successors (“The Arab World”, p. 113).

In brief, satire seems to have been an essential element in the Arabic novel since the emergence of the genre. In her book, *The Novel and The Rural Imaginary In Egypt, 1880-1985* (2004), Selim indicates that satire as a mode of expression can be seen even in the early forms of the Arabic novel, noting that Muhammad al-Muwaylihi’s *Hadith Issa Ibn Hisham* “criticised the chaos and injustice of the mixed courts system and the decadence of the ‘ulama in Egypt”² (p. 6). *Hadith Issa Ibn Hisham* is regarded by many critics to be a work of social satire, and “is intended to ridicule life in Egypt” (Moosa, 1997, p. 136). Moosa also describes the prose narrative *Hadith Issa Ibn Hisham* as containing the basic ingredients of the novel form, and praises the “subtlety with which al-Muwaylihi satirises Egyptian society” (p.139). Indeed, such tendency indicates that Arabic novel was not merely functioned as a source of entertainment, but more importantly as a means to enlighten the public: the novel as a genre proved to be an effective tool in depicting social reality, and therefore, educating the public of certain social illnesses in the hope of reforming society. The sole intention of the novel, in other words, is to reform the society. This genre, writes Mohamed Omri, “emerged alongside the desire to reform and remedy the backwardness of Arab societies where the first stage was a critique and a call for reform; the second focused on social conditions” (2006, p. 47). This indeed justifies Ahmad Ibrahim al-Hawwari’s claim that narrative fiction is the most appropriate literary form for “instilling moral principles, improving habits, smoothing rough edges, and turning men of taste and intellect into educators ... in the shape of amusement and humour” (cited in Selim, “The Narrative Craft”, 2003, p. 111). Despite this satiric bent, however, it was only during the last three decades of the 20th century that satire as a mode of expression came to dominate Arabic fiction, through the work of contemporary Arabic novelists such as Sonallah Ibrahim, Eduard Alkharrat, and Abdul Rahman Munif, to name but a few.

² *Hadith Issa Ibn Hisham* was initially serialized, but was then published as a book in 1907. It is considered by many critics as the highest form of *Maqama* and the beginning of the Egyptian novel. For more details, see Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction*, 28, as well as Matti Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction*, 136.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, Arabic novel acted like a mirror carried over which have reflected the social, economic and the political changes in this region. It underwent a long process before it became a recognizable genre of modern Arabic literature. What is at stake here, is that the satirical tone does not only form an important aspect of this genre, but it could have played an important role in the emergence and the development of this genre- given that the aim of the Arabic novel was primarily to reform society rather than entertaining the public.

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