

THE EXPERIMENTAL ARABIC NARRATIVES

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In the study of the emergence of the Arabic novel as a genre at the beginning of the second half of the nineteenth century, both Western critics and literary historians have stressed the European impact. They have seen the narrative works produced by their fellow writers as a continuation of the European narrative tradition. However, modern Arab novelists digressed from the norms of the European novel, restructuring the genre by utilizing the potentialities of the Arabic language and turath.

Arab novelists have reverted to history and turath for many reasons. First, turath plays a significant role in identity formation. Second, the prevalent destitute condition and the burden of losses and defeats in the Arab world have led to the inclination to see in great periods of classical Arabic culture a basis for the present awakening and future self-determination. Third, the novelists determine to counter the hostile image fabricated of Arabs.

In fact, Arab writers have explored experimental as well as realistic narratives commenting on the social and political conditions in Arab lands. For

them, realism is neither a period concept nor a literary movement, but rather an artistic approach to a reality that is complex and dynamic. Furthermore, it is

more than the details of external reality since it contains various conscious and unconscious levels of a person's interactions with the world. It came into being in the Arabic narratives amidst the nationalist atmosphere of the 1920s and 1930s, which led writers to give expression to the Egyptian personality by writing on themes pertaining to the everyday life of peasants and the lower classes. In Egypt, Realism knows no theoretical

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In the postmodern era experimental narratives have acquired an eminent position in the literary production of several Arab writers. One of the prominent Egyptian novelists is Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006). Mahfouz won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988. He is immersed in the Arabic tradition. Examples of his novels are *The Children of Gebelawi* (1959), *The Harafish* (1977), *Arabian Nights and Days* (1981) and *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma* (1983). In his novels, Mahfouz uses storytelling

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threads reminiscent of the Thousand and One Nights, Ibn Battuta's Travels, and other prehistoric novelistic forms in the Arabic tradition. With Mahfouz, the realistic trend became more complex. The way he sought to include a diversity of characters constituted a problem for him, and he found the solution in linking many different characters through their family ties. This is clear in *The Beginning and the End* and later in his trilogy *The Palace Walk*, *Palace of Desire* and *Sugar Street*.

Another experimental Egyptian novelist is Gamal Al-Ghitany (1945-2105). Al-Ghitany uses the historical novel as a means of commenting on the present. For long, the historical novel was used in Egypt as a form of escape from the present and its problems. Later generations of writers experimented with this form as a way of examining and understanding the present. Al-Ghitani's *Zayni Barakat* (1974) appears to be a historical novel, but all the characters are imaginary, springing from Ghitani's fecund imagination. It is meant to present an image of present-day reality in veiled form. The title lends it an aura of historical authenticity. The chief innovation in *Zayni Barakat* is the use of the form of the historical novel for the purpose of commenting, examining and understanding the present. It is not an escape from the present and its problems.

In Syria, the works of Ghada al-Samman (1942-) are far removed from the conventions of realism, as exemplified by her description of the Lebanese civil war (1975-1991). What she evokes is not a social or political reality, but an inner truth, the state of the city's soul. Her most significant works are *Beirut 75* and *Beirut Nightmares* (1976). They represent attempts to convey the brutality of war using the full range of experimental narrative techniques. *Beirut 75* is notable for its prophetic quality. It does not go so far as to predict the actual event of a civil war, but it describes a psy-

chological and moral condition reflecting all the elements of the social collapse to come. Her *Night of the first Billion* (*Laylat al-Milyar*, 1986) is a thematically multilayered novel in which she skillfully blends realism with fantasy.

In Palestine, Emile Habibi (1922-1996) is one of the contemporary Arab novelists who has revolutionized the form by going back to Arabic traditions in prose and poetry. Moreover, he is considered one of the first Arab novelists to fully exploit the technique of pastiche, infusing the novel with a multitude of quotations including poetry, short story, folk tale, memoir and autobiography, and other literary forms. Also, he fuses the maqamah examples of jokes and proverbs all into a single structure.

In conclusion, Arab writers like Naguib Mahfouz, Gamal Al-Ghitany, Ghada Al-Samman and Emile Habibi have shifted the development of the Arabic novel, and have redefined the meaning of drawing elements from both their own heritage and the European genre of the novel. In that sense, the concept of

world literature has been transformed, breaking through the Western bars that imprisoned literatures produced by other nations from East to West. More to the point, the literature that is considered original and moving is not that which imitates the Western tradition, but it is the literature that creates. Reviewing his trajectory as a novelist, Mahfouz states: "The European novel was sacred, and departure from this form was sacrilege." However, he goes further and adds: "I do not imitate either the maqama or Joyce. Frankly, what irritates me these days is imitation, even of tradition" (quoted in Ouyang 86).

Works Cited

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