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## MODERN ARABIC SHORT STORY: GENRE TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY

Literary processes taking place in Arab countries in the second half of the 20th century are synchronized as a whole and obtain clearly expressed indications of typological correspondences during that time. Their convergence is stipulated by both the natural occurrences in intrinsic artistic development and the political, social and economical transformations in the Arab world in the postcolonial period. Nevertheless, this does not mean a strengthening of the unity of separate Arabic literatures. Some divergent tendencies of their development are impelled by centrifugal and centripetal forces. On the one hand, a common literary language, an ethnic and religious monotony of the majority of Arabs, an unquenchable vitality of the idea of Arab unity, an intensification of cultural contacts and migration etc. are among the integrative phenomena. On the other hand, the varying levels of development in different countries, the growth of a national identity after their independence, as well as dialect diversity, turn into differentiating factors. They determine the specificity of each literature included into the dynamical unity of Arabic literature. The current research study aims to investigate the main tendencies in the development of modern Arabic short story connected with its genre modifications as seen in the works by Sulaymān al-Shaṭṭī, Ḥanān al-Shaykh, Walid al-Rajīb, Muḥammad Shukrī, al-Ṭāhir Waṭṭār and ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Madanī who represent different countries, literary schools and generations.

**Key words:** short story, transformation, theme, form, third-person narration, dialogue and monologue

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## 1. Traditional stories

In spite of their vast thematic, stylistic and even terminological variety, the short stories by Arab authors reveal the continuity of common artistic and aesthetic principles, determined by a priori recognition of conventionally conditioned reality. In accordance with this, the main content of their works is related to the life of the society, where social hierarchy of values has great significance. Moreover, aiming to reveal a variety of their national reality, the authors do not limit their fictions to an outward resemblance of the image to its original that characterizes the works of the so-called *renovators* (al-mujaddidīn) and after them the generation of the 1950s. In contrast to their forerunners, modern authors endeavor to recreate a relativistic picture of the world, where notions such as variability and discreteness become important, and concepts of time and space obtain existential meaning. This reorientation of the writers' interest is reflected in the formal and stylistic peculiarities of their narrative texts, represented by different types of writing, and determines the appearance of structural and genre formations, based on syncretism and contamination of heterogeneous elements.

The traditional story, written in the third person, is widely represented in modern Arabic prose. In contrast to the works of pioneers published in the first half of the 20th century, its genre paradigm is transformed significantly and is connected to a substantially more profound and detailed physiological analysis. This tendency occurs in the short stories by many modern writers, who apply different writing techniques, aiming to describe their national life through the destiny of man or to create his inner world as a closed system. One of the founders of modern Kuwaiti literature, Sulaymān al-Shaṭṭī (b. 1943),<sup>1</sup> prefers the third-person objective style in his short story *Rajul min al-raff al-‘ālī* (A Man from the upper floor, 1989) from the collection under the same name. Its structure has multiple levels, and is stipulated by the rapid changes of scenes and events that shape their integrity, corresponding to the logic of life itself. Besides this, the author tries to look into the depth of his hero's character and to confront it with the spiritual experience of the society. This is inevitably reflected in the constructional characteristic of the narrative, connected with the changing perspectives of the representation. In this representation, the panoramic view marks the stream

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Sulaymān al-Shaṭṭī was a professor at the Kuwait University, published several collections of short stories and critical studies on modern Kuwaiti literature including prose, poetry and drama.

of life by embracing and compacting events, while the close view focuses on the inner content of life.

In stylistic and conceptual aspects Sulaymān al-Shaṭṭī's fiction reminds some samples of neorealists, engaged with social and literary issues.<sup>2</sup> He promotes eternal values that are of moral and spiritual nature and are associated with compassion, devotion and sacrificial love for people. The search for these values turns into the life purpose of his protagonist 'Abd Allāh al-Dāir, who leaves his homeland for a new life. Being always on the road, moving from place to place, from one home to another, and trying his hand at different jobs, he is not able to obtain peace of mind. Once the protagonist returns home and confesses to his fellow villagers waiting for him:

“Meeting... Meeting... You are all passionately waiting for this meeting... As for me, I feel like I am crashing because of my passion for a meeting with you and fear of this meeting... The road is my home and your houses are on my road. I will travel till I am alive... You are the meaning in my life... Surely, a man, who lives for your sake, will enter the sacred paradise”

(Al-Shaṭṭī 1989: 53–54)

In this fiction the chronotope or the spatial-temporal frame of the road is not limited only by the protagonist's perspective, but includes time-space trajectories of other personages as well. The narrative time is discrete and is able to change its own flow because of the significance of one or another event or situation. As for the intervening time characterized by missing the plot dynamics, it saturates the narration psychologically, and indicates social determinants of the changes in the mentality of the protagonist. In that way, his biographical fragments and life adventures are perceived as a part of the national reality.

The Lebanese writer Ḥanān al-Shaykh (b. 1945)<sup>3</sup> also relies on an epic core principle of the correlation between the destiny of individual and the phenomena occurring in the world. In her novels and short stories she explores predominantly the psychology and social status of women in a traditionally conservative society and relies on different literary devices and strategies. In the short story *Bint ismuḥā Tufāḥā* that is a third-person narrative and is included into her first collection *Wardat*

<sup>2</sup> Engaged literature is discussed by Verena Klemm in her article *Different Notions of commitment (iltizām) and Committed Literature (al-adab al-multazim) in the Literary Circles of the Mashriq* (2000).

<sup>3</sup> Ḥanān al-Shaykh moved with her family to London in 1982. Some of her books were banned in Middle Eastern countries but garnered international recognition and were translated into different languages.

*al-ṣaḥrā'* (1982), the symbolism of names and colours plays an important role. Its main character Tufāḥā, whose name means *an apple*, is no longer young and still lives with her parents. Being mature more than enough to get married, she, however, does not want to be the subject of a sale – something that has happened to her girl friend with a fruit name – Mauza (banana). Compared to Mauza, Tufāḥā has more stamina to stand up against her father's will and the harmful wedding traditions.

According to custom, the oasis villagers hang the colourful flags on the roof of their houses in order to marry their daughters off. A red flag is placed if a girl does not reach the age of twenty. A blue flag indicates that she is under the age of thirty. Afterwards an yellow flag flutters in the wind. Approaching her forties, Tufāḥā loses hope to find her perfect man. Overwhelmed with fear, she finally decides to obey the conventional rules:

“Tufāḥā suddenly stooped down and looked under the bed. Then she carefully dragged out the basket, trying not to wake her mother, and took out an yellow flag. So far, no house needed to display a flag with this colour. She climbed the stairs and reached the roof while her mother and father and the whole oasis fell asleep... She knelt down to fix the flag and thought that their oasis was small, the number of men was limited, and there was no one suitable for a bride. She went downstairs, then sat down, breathing heavily, and began to wait for the knock at the door”

(Al-Shaykh 1982: 125)

## 2. Scenic stories

The intensification of intellectual and physiological levels of the narration is accompanied by the reduction in the dynamic range of outward events. This is revealed not only in the short stories, where the author takes the narrative initiative, but also in so-called *scenic stories* (qīṣaṣ masraḥiyya) or *dialogic stories* (qīṣaṣ ḥiwāriyya). Najīb Maḥfūz (1911–2006) determines this form as *ḥuwāriyy* and includes its samples into the collections of short stories *Ḥikāya bi-lā bidāya wa lā nihāya* (A Story without a beginning or an ending) and *Shahr al-ʿasal* (The Honeymoon), published in 1971. He points out:

“A Huwariyya is in essence a story which depends on dialogue.

If you want to read it as a story, you can.

And if you think it is suitable for the stage, no adaptation will be needed”

(El-Enany 1993: 209)

However, in different literary texts the dialogue has its own specificity. In the lyrical stories it expresses the dynamics of the protagonist's emotional experience, while in works distinguished by epic power it usually carries out an illustrative function as a component of the personage's characteristic. In the scenic stories, which are characterized by organic correlation of the narrative and descriptive elements, the dialogue usually reflects the action itself and turns into a dominant form of the conflict's realization. As for their scenes, they resemble drama as they easily break up into smaller structural fragments. Furthermore, the appearance of new characters in the narrative inevitably influences the development of the plot and is able to intensify its conflict situations as well.

The Kuwaiti writer Walid al-Rajīb (b. 1954),<sup>4</sup> for example, attempts to follow the canons of the dramatic arts in the short story *Nujūm aqall... Nujūm akthar* (Smaller Stars... Bigger Stars), inserted into his first collection *Tu'allaq nuqṭa... tasquṭ... ṭaq* (A Drop sticks... and falls, 1983). In this fiction he discusses the problem of freedom in a country governed by a military-dominated regime, and divides his narrative into several parts by keeping a conventional composition that includes exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and dénouement. These parts are marked in the text as *scenes* (mashāhid) and are based on the dialogues between an officer, his bride and his chief officer. Besides this, the short story is accompanied by the author's short remarks that clarify some details and the personages' speech.

In doing so, Walid al-Rajīb aspires not only to reveal the relations between his characters, but also to involve them in a wider social context in order to make a generalization. The protagonist of his short story is a young officer, who falls in love with a girl. Suddenly he realizes that their wedding is threatened because of her father's political attitudes. In the final part the young man finds himself in a difficult situation that requires his quick decision:

“The chief officer put the cigar in his mouth and stood up:

– Keep calm and listen news... We have checked the data concerning a girl to whom you are going to marry. Her father is against the government.

The young officer was surprised:

– Mister, I do not understand...

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<sup>4</sup> Walid al-Rajīb received his BA from Helwan University (Egypt, 1978) and his MA from Western Michigan University (USA, 1985). He published several novels, collections of short stories and poems, as well as studies on hypnosis and on *Reiki* (Japanese alternative medicine).

The chief officer:

– You know well that the homeland and its security for us are above everything.

The young officer stood motionless while the chief officer looked through the papers, then gave him a paper and said:

– The order has arrived and in accordance with this order you cannot marry her...

The young officer stood, focusing his attention. As for the chief officer, he continued talking:

– As a matter of fact, you have to choose between a military uniform and a girl”

(Al-Rajīb 1983: 25-26)

The dialogue plays an important structural and functional role in the works written by the Moroccan writer Muḥammad Shukrī (1935–2003)<sup>5</sup> whose poetics are associated with *cruel, incisive realism* (al-wāqī'īya al-qāsiyya). Accordingly, they reveal some negative phenomena of the life of human beings who are at the bottom of society. Among them are prostitutes, beggars and criminals, named by the critic Mawdī Bayṭār as *heroes of the night* (Bayṭār 2001: 16). In the short story *Al-Juththa al-gharība* (The Strange corpse) from the collection *Al-Khaima* (The Tent, 1985) Muḥammad Shukri tends to display the indifference and cruelty of the modern world where a man is born alone and dies alone.

The author splits his text into five parts, which differ from each other both by their size and dramatic saturation. Their integrity is stipulated by the internal implications that depend on polysemantic interconnections of a speech of characters, a commentary of the author, and a figurative background. Moreover, the conceptual representation of national reality broadens due to the introduction of anonymous personages, even though they are not always explicitly connected with the scenic context. Like many other works of Muḥammad Shukrī, in this story the recreated reality is perceived as real, though it is woven from contradictions and absurdity. Its narrative saturation becomes sharper when people accidentally discover a man, dead in the city square. However, the lifeless body does not provoke their compassion or sorrow, but only idle curiosity:

<sup>5</sup> Muḥammad Shukrī gained international recognition with his first novel *Al-Khubz al-ḥāfi* which was translated into English by Paul Bowles under the title *For Bread Alone* in 1973, but was not published in Arabic until 1982.

- The strange corpse has been here since ten o'clock in the morning.  
 – Look how it radiates phosphoric light.  
 – I see.  
 – This is the first time ever I see such a corpse.  
 – Yes. Indeed, it is a strange corpse...  
 – I wonder whether anybody has come nearer to the dead body.  
 – Are you mad? Who will dare to do this? The corpse is burning. Who will come close to this corpse?  
 – Yes. Nobody has dared until now”

(Shukri 2006: 95)

### 3. Lyrical stories

In contrast to the narratives, where an individual life stream is oriented towards a reflection of the objective world, in the lyrical stories saturated mainly by internal monologues, the reality becomes material for the creation of a subjective image and is perceived sensually. This type of narration is represented in the works by the Algerian writer al-Ṭāhir Waṭṭār (1936–2010),<sup>6</sup> who comprehensively depicts national life during the French-Algerian war (1954–1962) and the first years of independence. In his short stories *Al-Bukhār* (The Steam) and *Al-Ṭā'anāt* (The Stabs), included into the collection with the same name (*Ṭā'anāt*, 1971), the protagonist observes himself and his life from the outside. Thus his emotional experience is overwhelmed with disappointments from the postwar reality it acquires, which has a particular importance for forming the plot. Furthermore, a functional division of his image into an object and a subject of the narration inevitably provokes the sensation of the objectivity of the depiction.

In *Al-Ṭā'anāt* the major character is a soldier, demobilized after the Algerian war of independence and imbued with the traumatic memories of the so-called *ḥarkī*.<sup>7</sup> He considers this *ḥarkī* as a national traitor because of his service in the French army. Faced with the vicissitudes of life in the postwar period, the protagonist gains a deep understanding that in his searches for this traitor he has lost himself and awareness for the real world. Hence an image of the gloomy bog floats through his mind, scorching his consciousness from time to time. This bog is

<sup>6</sup> Like Muḥammad Shukrī, al-Ṭāhir Waṭṭār was born into a Berber family and received his education in Constantine and Tunis. He is best remembered for his novels, especially for *Al-Lāz* (1972) and *Al-Zilzāl* (The Earthquake, 1974) translated into different languages.

<sup>7</sup> Initially, Algerian soldiers in the French army during this war were named *ḥarkī*.

not only a part of the melancholic landscape, but it is also perceived as a metaphor of the war and a symbol of the bottom of life. Evaluating himself, the protagonist confesses his own diminishment as a human being:

“This is me. I am a piece of the string dragged by the flow of foul water... No, I am a blind turtle that has been lost on the very brink of the stagnant and fetid bog... No, I am trivial saliva that is leaking from the mouth of a drunken man... Two feet, two hands, a chest without a heart, a head without eyes... Stabs... Stabs... Dead bodies do not feel pain because of the stabs... Only men can feel these stabs”

(Waṭṭār 2005: 15–17)

Like *Al-Ṭa’anāt*, the second short story *Al-Bukhār* is concerned with the experience of exile. Its space-time structure is also conditioned by the associative mechanisms and most of all by psychology of recollections. The main character is a former prisoner who faces different challenges on his return home and is unable to adjust to a new life. Every moment experienced in the past is perceived as a part of his present emotional state. Moreover, the opposite direction of the *stream of consciousness* (*tayyār al-wa’y*) toward the objective time becomes inevitable and lets the author avoid the distortion of the character of his personage and its alogicality, while also maintaining the internal dynamics of the plot development.

The protagonist’s aesthetic attitude toward the objective time and the outer world is revealed through his perception of real life phenomena. After the death of both his daughter and his wife, he is unable to find a job and eventually finds himself in a place of spiritual emptiness:

“When death comes around... it does not require any payment... but takes just our corpses... It seizes our life when we are weak... We let the death take our dead bodies too cheaply when we are hungry and are unemployed..., or when we look for a job and cannot find it... Death comes without warning. This is generally a bad thing... However, it is worse to die because of joblessness... No, the worst is that we die... and decay without wishing to resist...”

(Waṭṭār 2005: 128)

The past, memory and reminiscence become construction elements in the works of ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Madanī (b. 1938)<sup>8</sup> known as one of

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<sup>8</sup> ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Madanī graduated from the Collège de France and worked as a journalist and government official. Among his publications are plays, novels, short story collections and literary studies.



the pioneers of experimental literature in Tunis. In his short story *A Lā tadhkurīn* (Do you remember, 1967) the protagonist is revealed as a bifurcated man. His inner bifurcation is maintained simultaneously by the conscious awareness of his own wishes and desires, and by the impossibility of fulfilling them. He is not able to throw away his past experience and to reconcile himself to his current life. However, the protagonist is constantly obsessed with the recollections of his former sweetheart. These intrusive thoughts become not only thicker, but modify a model of the world existing in his mind. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, in that way the chronotope is subjectivized due to the merging of specific features of space and time (Bakhtin 1975: 235).

Furthermore, the narrative structure of this fiction is characterized by its distinctive rhythmic organization. While the separate events are synthesized in the plot, the mental and sensory nuances refine an image that is relevant to a personal emotional experience. Its dynamics are determined by keywords, leitmotifs and lexical repetitions. This process is intensified by the graphic design and the absence of punctuation marks in the text:

"You were sitting next to me that night  
You were sitting next to him that night  
I will not sit next to you after this night [.]

On a moonlit night which was brightened by the shining lights you sat next to him or you sat next to me [.] When you sat next to him or you sat next to me on a moonlit night which was brightened by the shining lights [.] I felt that the earth turned me around like I was a whirligig [.] After you had sat next to him on a moonlit night which was brightened by the shining lights [.] I felt like I was a whirligig which was rotated on the ground [.]"

(Al-Madani 1967: 94)

Izz al-Dīn al-Madani avoids using the punctuation marks in his other fiction *Al-ʿUdwān* (The Aggression, 1988) in order to express the intense emotional state of the character, alienated from his family and friends and taken prisoner. Although in his unfinished novel *Al-Insān al-ṣifr* (The Man zero, 1968–1971),<sup>9</sup> dedicated to philosophical topics, the author, on the contrary, intersperses some parts of his text with diacritical marks. Moreover, aiming to increase the emotional impact of his work that is characterized by an extreme iconoclasm (Fontaine 1998: 481), he uses onomatopoeic words and sounds such as *sir-shir*, *liz-liz*,

<sup>9</sup> Izz al-Dīn al-Madani's novel *Al-Insān al-ṣifr* was published partly in the Tunisian journals *Qiṣaṣ* and *Al-Fikr* (1968–1971).

tik-tak etc. As the literary critic Muhammad al-Bāridī mentioned, the novel aroused public indignation because of his frivolous attitude towards the sacred text of Islam and linguistic techniques (Al-Bāridī 1997: 82–85).

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MODERN ARABIC SHORT STORY: GENRE TRANSFORMATION  
IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY

Summary

The transformations in modern Arabic prose display a variety of types and forms of the genre interaction that is stipulated by hybridity and syncretism of the generic characteristics. However, two main tendencies are revealed in the short stories of Sulaymān al-Shaṭṭī, Ḥanān al-Shaykh, Walīd al-Rajīb, Muḥammad Shukrī, al-Ṭāhir Waṭṭār and ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Madanī that are represented by the third person narratives, monological and dialogical forms and are distinguished respectively by the epic, lyric and dramatic pathos. On the one hand, the authors’ aspiration for creating a conceptual epic picture of national reality is displayed due to the saturation of the implication in the texts. On the other hand, the authors persistently strive to investigate the psychological processes, occurring in the internal world of their characters. In spite of the formal, structural, stylistic and thematic differences, their works are united by the emotional tension, and by a search for moral and social standards in the world of changing values. All these short stories confirm the dynamic character of modern Arabic prose and widen its artistic horizons.