

HISTORICIZING THE AFRO-ARABIC FICTION IN NORTH AFRICA: THE CHALLENGES AND DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Recent scholarship on Arabic fiction in North African countries is concerned mainly with political, economic and socio-cultural issues with little attention paid to the personal challenges confronting the authors, the readers and even the critics over the years. This paper examines the history of Arabic fiction, with attention to its development and challenges. This paper briefly reviews the emergence of Arabic fiction in North African countries; discuss its early beginning, development and features. North African countries: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Sudan and Egypt were selected for the study. The writers of Arabic fiction in the North Africa countries exhibit the challenges and development in North Africa in particular and Africa in general.

Keywords: North Africa, Arabic, Fiction, Challenges, Development

Introduction

Development is a central organizing concept of the contemporary period. This is represented in a wide variety of ways, whether within the academic environment, the policy world or the general public domain. It is highly contended that all forms of development and its challenges can be historically understood as series of stories (Lewis 2013). Certainly, the story telling habit is as old as development itself, and Afro-Arabic fiction is no exception. Africans have a whole lot of traditionally related tales portraying their tribal lives. These tales embodied many aspects of their behaviour, such as self-praise, courage and acquisition of knowledge. They also delve into spiritual, political and economic development and challenges of Africa as a continent (Draz, 1981).

Afro-Arabic Fiction: Emergence and Development

The most courageous phenomenon that has been noticed so far is that Egypt was greatly instrumental to the emergence of and development of Arabic fiction in Africa. Egypt's contact with the West created a healthy climate for literary ideas and institutions. The establishment of Cairo University in 1908, with its concentration on humanities, especially literature, produced a host of Afro-Arab writers. While mastering their craft, these writers began gradually to break with the traditional forms of Arabic fiction and create a sophisticated socio-cultural and political Arabic fiction (Starkey, 2006). The aim of these writers was to showcase the socio-cultural life of Afro-Arab in particular and Africans in general. Also, they emphasized the miserable condition of Africans. The contention is that

their portrayal of the condition of Africans through fiction might eventually provoke social consciousness and become conducive to improve the Africa as a continent.

Although Egyptian writers continued to dominate the writing and production of Arabic fiction, the period towards the end of 1970s saw a significant increase in the interest in the novel form in other parts of North African countries (Jad, 1983). This period witnessed the emergence of Tunisian writers; such as Mahmud al-Mas'adi, Amina Saïd and Ali Duaj. Also in Algeria, a number of notable fiction writers such as Muhammad Arkūn, Sālim Aisha and Jamal Amrani sprang up (Starkey, 2006).

Morocco, popularly called *Maghrib*, produced contemporary fiction writers -such as Muhammad Shukri, Abdullahi Laroo, Abdurahim Lahbib. In Sudan, Tayib Salih, Rauf Mushad, Laylah Abdullahi came on board. Mauritanian and Libyan fiction writers are not left out in the contribution to the development of Arabic fiction in Africa.

In the several lands across North Africa, maturely conceived and competently fashioned novels written in Arabic have only appeared relatively recently, which is to say during the last three decades of the twentieth century (Ali, 2003). There are indeed a number of North African writers of Arabic who have succeeded in bringing their talented accomplishments to the attention of readers in the Arab East as well.

Among novelists deserving special mention in Algeria are al-Tāhir Wattār, 'Abd al-Hamīd ibn Haddūqa, and Wāsīnī al-'A'raj. Morocco has produced a large number of novelists: 'Abd al-Karīm Ghallāb, Mubārak Rabī', 'Abdallāh al-'Urawī, Muhammad Zafzāf, Muhammad Barrāda 'Ahmad al-Madanī and Lahamdānī Hamīd. In Tunisia, Mahmūd al-Mas'adī, Muhsin bin Diyāf, al-Bashīr

Khurayyif, Muhammad al-Sālih al-Jābirī, and 'Izz al-Dīn al-Madinī are novelists of high standing (Selim, 2004). In Libya, 'Ahmad al-Faqīh and 'Ibrāhīm al-Kūnī are leading novelists. Mauritania has, thus far, not produced any novel to compare with their fine achievements in poetry.

Moroccan novels have been strongly committed to themes involving the resistance against French colonial rule. They also criticized negative aspects of the period after independence. Indeed, the struggle against colonialism has been a central source of thematic material of many novels in Algeria and, to some extent, in Tunisia (Ostle, 1991).

This trend has been so dominant in Morocco that it inspired one critic to say, "They are writing one novel. They just change the titles." Among the most important and mature works focusing on the struggle for independence are by 'Abd al-Karīm Ghallāb, who wrote *Dafannā al-mādī (We Have Buried the Past)* in 1966, and *al-Mu'allim 'Alī (Boss 'Alī)* in 1971.

The first Arabic novels in Egypt appeared somewhat first before the genre began in Tunisia. The reasons for this delayed start may be attributed to the status of the Arabic language and the Arabic heritage in Algeria, even before the French occupation in 1830. Generally speaking, Arabic was not cultivated at the same standard as in Tunisia and Morocco; the two Arab Francophone countries (Omri, 2006). The Mosques in Egypt and Algeria were not established only for spiritual development alone but were also centers for the teaching of Arabic and continuing scholarship in the Arabic poetry and prose (Sakkout, 1971).

As one would expect, after the victory of the Algerian revolutionaries, which ended the French colonial presence and halted French linguistic and cultural domination,

there were many Algerian writers who had a superb mastery of the French language and novelistic traditions. After independence, there began a massive and all inclusive movement of Arabization, which the revolutionary leadership directed to restore to Algeria her full Arab personality. It was natural then that novelists who gained the necessary linguistic proficiency launched boldly into writing creative works of fiction in Arabic. Thus, in 1965, al-Tāhir Wattār (1936) set out to write his famous novel *al-Lāz*, which he completed in 1972. One year earlier, °Abd al-Hamīd ibn Haddūqa (1925) published his first novel *Rīh al-janūb* (*The South Wind*), which is considered to be the first maturely conceived and strikingly well-composed Algerian novel in Arabic. In the years immediately following, there appeared a succession of works by these two distinguished novelists. Al-Tāhir Wattār published a number of novels, of which *al-Zilzāl* (*The Earthquake*) of 1974, stands out. °Abd al-Hamīd ibn Haddūqa published numerous novels, among which *al-Jāziya wa al-darāwīsh* (*al-Jāziya and the Dervishes*, 1983) is his most striking (Badawi, 1985).

Strictly speaking, Sudanese novels appeared from publishing houses in the early 1960s. However, despite a certain reknown fame which some writers achieved, for instance, °Ibrāhīm al-Hardalu, °Abū Bakr Khālīd, and Makkī Muhammad °Alī, no Sudanese novelist to date has been so widely acclaimed by well-read fans of the Arabic novel in the Arab world at large as al-Tayyib Sālih, who was born in 1929. Sālih has written three novels. His published works, though few in number, are held in high esteem and are generally considered as top notch by readers and critics alike. First came

Mawsim al-hijra °ilā al-Shamāl (*Season of Migration to the North*, 1966), then °Urs al-Zayn (*The Wedding of al-Zayn*, 1967), followed by Bandar Shāh. This last mentioned work is divided into two parts: Daw' al-bayt (*The Light of the House*), which appeared in 1971, and the second part, Maryūd, which came out in 1977 (Badawi, 1985).

Novels began to appear in Libya in the late 1950s. More than forty novels were published, representing over twenty Libyan writers. Of these novelists, three in particular stand out: °Ahmad °Ibrāhīm al-Faqīh, Khalīfa Mustafā (b. 1944) and °Ibrāhīm al-Kūnī (1948). It is sufficient here to give a summary of some of the works of two of these novelists, al Faqīh and al Kūnī.

In North Africa, Tunisia led the way in the emergence of the Arabic novels, at least in terms of early publication. Not only did the Arabic novel appear very early in Tunisia in comparison with its neighbours, but also many novels were published in the early years right from the start. The Arab world is still waiting, however, for a Tunisian novelist to produce a mature novel of aesthetic refinement, narrative élan, and psychological and/or cultural depth which would put Tunisian novelists in the forefront among their contemporaries (Sakkout, 1977).

Tunisian writers are the least in the running among top-notch Arabic novelists. Probably the first among serious Arabic novelists in Tunisia is Prof. Mahmūd al-Mas°adī, who received his higher education in France. His specialization in Arabic literature allowed him to acquire an excellent competence in both the Arabic and French cultures.

Tāhā Husayn once said of him, "This Tunisian litterateur has become truly erudite in Arabic culture and has completed his studies in France, where he has reached an

excellent standard in his knowledge of French literature. He has been much influenced by the renowned French philosophical writer, Albert Camus.”

These remarks of Tāhā Husayn were printed on *al-Sadd (The Dam)*, (Curzon, 2003). In Tāhā Husayn's description, "This is a play, or it should more aptly be termed a theatrical story, which the well-known author Prof. Mahmūd al-Mas'adi wrote to be read, not acted." Be that as it may, al-Mas'adi's novels reveal a broad culture and intellectual depth. The language he uses, however, in particular in a novel like *Haddatha 'Abū Hurayra qāl ('Abu Hurayra Told the Following Story 1973)*, is cast in an ornamented and pedantic style, influenced by the tradition of Classical Arabic rhetoric. Although this style is considered by some critics as a skillful adaptation of Classical language, which marks an original new direction in novel-writing, in my opinion, it is entirely unsuitable for either modernist or traditional fiction.

Literary Challenges and the Period of Maturity

It is interesting to read the more recent fiction written by North African writers and to witness the way they represent the subtle shades of social and political life of Africans. A close reading of their works reveals that the writers are not only perceptive but also at odds with current social and political systems. One would be surprised to discover the number of Arab fiction writers who are concerned about African issues and how comprehensive their understanding of the values and cultures of other African countries are. Among the challenges facing Afro-Arabic fiction writers, readers and critics include: reading culture, publication, loss of African literary heritage, political instability, low standard of

living and stagnation in educational development (Allen, 1994).

A major advance in Arabic novelistic technique occurred between 1960s to 2010. This advancement is well exemplified by the publication of many novels and short stories across the North African countries. They centered on African development and challenges.

Tawfiq al-Hakim, an Egyptian playwright and novelist, is a prominent and relevant writer in this context. Although his continued reputation undoubtedly owes more to his plays than to his prose writings, his novel, *Awdat al-Ruh*, (Return of the Spirit) is very important. This novel plays a crucial role in the development of modern Arabic fiction. *Awdat al-Ruh* is closely modelled on the author's experiences in his home town, Cairo. The work depicts the frustrated life of middle class in Egypt.

Another writer, Ahmad Hafiz Awad emphasized the deleterious influence of Western civilization in Africa. In his novel, *al-Hal wa al-Ma'al* (The Present and the Future), he assails this influence and shows the effect of Western civilisation on his characters. The story concerns a young lady, Asma, whose relationships with other people reveal the evils of Western influence.

Mahmud Khayrat is more deeply preoccupied with portraying the deplorable conditions and ignorance of *Fallahin*. His novels, *al-Fata al-Rifi* (The Young Countryman) and *al-Fatat al-Rifiya* (The Young Countrywoman) are examples of his passionate concern for the improvement of the human condition in North Africa in particular and Africa in general.

Ali al-Du'aji combines artistic life with an interest in politics. He is known as “the Father of the Modern Tunisian Fiction”. His fictions are full of narrative experimentation, and explore the tensions and ironies of

cultural co-existence between Africa and Europe. Ali al-Du'aji's novel, *falsafatuna*, "our philosophy", depicts the national politics and the need for Africa as a continent to create a cultural co-existence and uphold the African heritage.

Al-Bab al-Maftuh (The Open Door), by Latifah al-Zayyat presents the struggle against the injustice of Egyptian government. The narrative operates at three different levels as regards society, country and Africa. These levels interact and intersect, one influencing the others (Moosa, 1997). Throughout the novel, the themes of development and nation building are inseparable, and the social dimension provides convincing proof that development and nation building in Africa are permanently interwoven.

Taha Husayn, particularly well known for his daring proposals for fiction, educational and social reforms, occupies a prominent place in the North African literary renaissance (Mehrez, 1994). His novel, *Al-Ayam*, explores social, political and economic developments in a serious and concentrated attempt to find an opening for a positive change, a beginning that every citizen can contribute to as a partner in developing the nation.

Najib Mahfouz: The Egyptian Epitome of Human Development

Najib Mahfouz, was one of the most prolific Egyptian authors and almost certainly the best known writer of Arabic fiction on at international level, following the award to him of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988. He was born in an old quarters of Cairo. Mahfuz studied philosophy at Cairo University but abandoned his postgraduate study in the subject as his interest in literature began to grow, partly under the Influence of Salama Musa (Al-Musawi, 2003). His first literary output consisted of

short stories, which he continued to write all his life, but his lasting reputation depends mainly on his novels. He has produced over thirty novels. His career is also a graphic representation of the much repeated statement that few, if any writer, in the modern Arab world has been able to earn a living from writing alone. In 1939, he joined the Egyptian civil service and until his retirement in the early 1970s, he divided his energies between creative writing and the Egyptian bureaucracy, serving for a time in the Ministry of Waqfs and from 1954 in the Ministry of Culture, working in particular in the field of cinema, where he adapted for film works of writers such as Ibsan 'Abd al-Qaddus and Yusuf al-Siba'i, among others.

Mahfuz's output is of importance, not only in its own right, but also because, like Tawfiq al-Hakim's output in the field of drama, his works serve as a sort of barometer of changing tastes and priorities in the field generally (Al-Musawi, 2003).

Najib Mahfuz's prodigious output in terms of full-length novels is indeed a tribute to his meticulous personal organisation of his working time. His first novel, *'Abath al-Aqddr* (1939), a historical novel that owes much to Abu Hadld's work *Ibnat al-Mamluk*, is probably of little value in itself except as a promise of things to come; two further novels set in ancient are Egypt: *Radubis* (1943) and *Kifah Tlba* (1944), the latter of which in particular attracted considerable critical attention, confirmed that Egypt had produced a budding novelist of extraordinary talent (Khaled, 2013). Although he had originally planned an extended series of historical novels, he soon, like Adil Kamil and 'Abd al-Hamid al-Sahhar, redirected his attention to contemporary Egypt, and a series of works followed, set in various quarters of Cairo, which explore the search for new values in the changing society of

contemporary Egypt. Peopled with the colourful inhabitants of the Cairo backstreets, these novels include *al'Qahira al-Jadida* (1945), *Khan al-Khalili* (1946), *Zuqaq al-Midaqq* (1947), *al-Sarab* (1948) and *Biddya wa-Nihaya* (1949). These series of novels culminated in the monumental trilogy (*Thulathiyya*), which won the Egyptian State Prize for Literature in 1957 and on which Mahfuz's international reputation was initially largely based. The work, originally written before the 1952 revolution but not published until 1957, lovingly chronicled the life of three generations of a lower-middle-class Egyptian family and the transition from a traditional to a more modern way of life in the period between the two world wars. As in previous novels, a prominent theme is the search for meaning and moral certainty, but a hint of the turbulent period on which Egypt was about to embark is provided at the end of the last section of the novel, when the two brothers, Ahmad and 'Abd al-Mun'im, went their separate ways, one to the left wing of the Wafd party, the other to the Muslim Brothers (Al-Musawi, 2003).

Mahmud al-Mas'adi: A North African Fiction Writer Per Excellence

Mahmud al-Mas'adi holds a distinct position in Tunisian fiction as the only writer of socio-developmental novels. Like many other writers, (Sakkout, 1971: 56) al-Mas'adi wrote his novel which is centered on loss of social values in Africa. He was born in Tozerka in Algeria on the 28 January, 1911. He finished secondary school at As-Sadiqi College, Tunis. He then moved to Paris where he studied Arabic and obtained Ph.D, and qualified to teach in higher schools. In the years 1944-1947, he was editor-in-chief of the famous journal "Al-Mabahith" (Quests), in which he promoted young talented writers, starting

their literary career in Arabic. He has always been an ardent advocate and defender of the literary in Arabic language which he has mastered to perfection. In the years 1935-1948, he taught in secondary schools and became an inspector from 1948 to 1955 in Tunis in the Tunisian Ministry of National Education (Sakkout, 1971)

Al-Mas'adi was preoccupied with socio-developmental ideals as reflected in his text, *Haddatha* (Modernity) where he depicted his hero as a victim of the society; the hero was denied a quality education, which later resulted in psychological disorder.

General Recommendations

- There should be a comprehensive reading of North African novels from this part of the world. This will enable the readers to familiarize themselves with the themes and styles of North African literary writings.
- Efforts should be made by Arabic scholars to translate the Arabic texts of North African novels into other languages such as English, French, Yoruba, Hausa and many others. This will educate and enlighten both African Anglophones and Francophones alike about the intercultural and interreligious nature of Africa.
- Governments at all levels and within their respective jurisdictions (Federal, State and Local) should ensure that Arabic is a language like other languages which deals with poetry, prose, essays, journalism, linguistics and science and not only language of a particular religion.

Conclusion

The above account is inevitably a condensed one, which can do little more than give an impression of the history of Arabic

fiction, with attention to its development and challenge that have characterized Arabic fiction since its emergence in North Africa. Although Egyptian authors remained central to developments in the early 1950s, competent fiction writers increasingly began to emerge in other parts of *Maghrib* countries (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and others). Central to the rapid and substantive development of Arabic fiction in North Africa was, of course, the Nobel Prize for Literature won by Najib Mahfouz and Mahmud al-Masad whose works centered on Afro-Arab development on one hand, and Africa on the other hand.

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