

Prose – the Modern Chronicle of the Arabs

Centuries ago, the Arab 'Republic of Letters' was convinced that poetry was the 'Diwan' of the Arabs, meaning the register of their deeds, the chronicle of their events. In poetry, so the 9th century *littérateur* Ibn Qutayba claimed, the Arabs laid down all the information worth transmitting to posterity. It is a vision of the social role of poetry that takes a long time to die out and still enjoys a certain popularity in the Arab World and well beyond.

This is so even though prose writing has long carried the torch, first predominantly as short stories, later – and by now mainly – as novels, and literary criticism has claimed, ever since the interwar-period, for prose literature (now mainly the novel) the role of this Diwan of the Arabs. It is narration, storytelling, so the argument runs, that is needed to come to grips with the riddles of our times, not the awe-inspiring verbal juggling of poetry. It is a red thread that is needed, not the free associations of images.

In brief, we no longer live in the age of poetry but in the age of the novel. The death of the novel has not been a favorite topic of Arabic literary criticism in the same way it has in the West.

Thus, the novel is, at present, *the* literary genre between Morocco and Iraq, between Oman and Syria. For a long time, maybe from the beginning of the 20th century, it was the framework of the ideological battle of Arab nationalism vs. nation-state nationalism and anti-colonialism. The rise of the novel, in the Arab world as elsewhere, is intimately tied to or at least advanced, by the development of nation states in the area during the first half of the 20th century.

There was, to be sure, prose writing before that, first attempts to tie up Arabic fiction with modern international (i.e. Western) literary developments – in terms of style and genre as well as in terms of content. One of the very first examples is the story *Alas, I am not European* (1860) by the Syrian-Lebanese Khalil al-Khoury, making fun of certain social groups who, in their attempts to be more European than the Europeans themselves, fail miserably and even make themselves look ridiculous. There followed a long series of prose works built on folktales or translations and/or adaptations of Western novels and short stories. Their purpose was, in addition to keeping up with the Europeans, didactic and entertaining.

An important step in the evolution of modern fiction in the Arab world came with the formation of nation states, a development closely connected with anti-colonialist struggles. In different varieties and shades and with time differences due to disparate stages of development, this can be observed in many Arab countries, first and foremost in Egypt (where it has been particularly

well studies) but also in Iraq, Lebanon and – first in French, later in Arabic – in the North African countries under French domination. Literature took over the national task – formulated by umpteen authors, critics and literary circles – to present ‘realistically’ what were considered the particularities of a people, a nation and a region. Individuals were shown embedded in their society or in confrontation with it, including the fight as individuals or groups for their daily bread and against the occupying force. Literature, thus, became an illustration and a means of propagation of national identity as formulated at the same time by politicians, cultural activists and historians.

There was, to be sure, behind the attempts to articulate a national identity strong social and political criticism in the works then produced, but the style almost exclusively followed the model of European Realism and Naturalism insisting that the literary work was a true mirror of lived reality and implying that this reality could be appropriately narrated ‘as it is’.

Realism of this kind, of an art that mirrors the so-called reality the way it is, avoiding anything that is not ‘real’ or ‘possible’, was eventually complemented or, indeed, pushed somewhat aside in order to make conventional ‘realist’ writing just one kind of several. This happened during and following the time of the big upheavals in the Arab world during the 1950s, the 1960s and the 1970 when shock waves ran through the whole region upsetting generally shared and propagated certainties – political, social, cultural.

Simultaneously with this ‘diversification’ of Arabic prose writing mainly in the 1960s, a widening of the acquaintance by Arab authors with international novel and short-story writing could be observed including the debates about the nature and function of literature: Jean-Paul Sartre and his idea about *littérature engagée* became en vogue, as did Ernest Hemingway’s short and concise sentences. Franz Kafka’s Kafkaesque atmosphere became known and has been applied, not surprisingly, to Arab circumstances ever since, as has William Faulkner’s polyphony following the translation of his *The Sound and the Fury* by the eminent Palestinian novelist Jabra Ibrahim Jabra in 1961.

Now style and content multiplied. Reality was no longer considered to be a fixed state but became as variegated as the narrative forms developed to reflect on it. Topics ranged from the particular and the local to the general and the universal, from the detailed description of village life to the mythological treatment of human existence, touching upon social, political, cultural, ecological, religious and other questions and not infrequently drawing on stylistic and topical elements from the rich tradition of centuries of Arabic writing.

It was this trend that led to the still ongoing debate about the position of contemporary Arabic prose between European import and autochthonous narrative traditions, the latter consisting of a huge treasure of both scholarly writings and popular literature. There are authors thoroughly imbued with this tradition, and others deliberately neglecting it, and there are many in between. And they all do what novelists all over the world do: to sense, not unlike a seismograph, tremors in their world and present them in one of the great variety of forms and style internationally available enriched by the local or regional narrative traditions. To speak about THE Arabic novel, implying similarities in substance and style beyond the sheer Arabic language would certainly not or no longer seem appropriate. Too different are the works of Arabic literature produced between Irak und Morocco, between Oman and Syria. There are novels on cities and other on villages; novels that try to remain on earth and others that carry away into realms of phantasy and absurdity. Human 'reality', in the Arab world as elsewhere, goes much beyond traditional and unifying 'realism'.

(Aus: *The Middle East in London* 15/i [Dez. 2018 – Jan. 2019], S. 8-9)