

GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF ARABIC FICTION: A BRIEF DISCUSSION

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ABSTRACT

Fiction is one of the most important genres of Arabic literature. The Arab literary history did not have the scarcity of fictional creations instead there existed some sorts of creations. The fiction, as we know today, it was associated with a large body of narrative styles in it which not only left its ineradicable mark on the formation and development of the modern European fiction literature, but also facilitated its adoption among the Arab literary scholars and readers that bear appreciation and interest. Among the most popular tales, myths and epic romances are – The Thousand and One Nights, Maqamat, Hadith Isa ibn Hisham etc.

KEYWORDS: Fiction, Arabic Literature, Thousand and One Nights, Maqamat, Hadith Isa Ibn Hisham etc

INTRODUCTION

Fiction is an indefinite technical term used for the various genres and reflects the similar situation in Western languages. The term for the novel in most European languages is “roman”, which is derived from the medieval term, the romance. The English name for the form, on the other hand, is derived from the Italian “novella”¹

As regards to the situation in Arabic, it is a well-known fact that Arabic has, of course, produced technical terms for the identification and description of specific literary genres of fiction. The terminology used the general followed pattern of English, choosing the term *Qissa Qasirah* for the short story and, for the most part, *riwayah* for novel. “For the most part” is intended to reflect the fact that for a minority of writers in the Arab world, the preferred term for the novel is *Qissa*, the generic term for “story” or “narrative”.²

Keeping in mind the general characteristics of the novel noted above, it is considerably better to discuss how the Arabic novel first came into being. There is a strong objection that the Arab people had no genuine fictional history in the early 20th century and up to the 1960s the notion of literary dearth and paucity in Arab fictional modes permeated the thinking of some leading Arab critics about origins, literary merit, and creativity. Fiction was one of the major genres said to have had feeble roots in classical Arabic literature. As far as the literature of the past is concerned Arab literary history did not have the scarcity of fictional creations instead there existed some sorts of creations prior to the advent of Islam in 622 A.D.

DESCRIPTION

It is aware of that Arabic literary fiction appears in the modern period, but its root may be conceived in the short anecdotes that which is conspicuous in the ‘*maqama*’ literature thrived in the Abbasid period. In fact, the literary genre ‘*riwayah*’ i.e. novel flourished at par excellence only in the modern period as and when the Arabs came to acquaintance with the literary aspects of the west.

As indicated earlier, literary critics have been found to keep views with a little bit difference. It appears that Arab has written novelistic narrative literature since very early times. Another group of scholars are of the opinion that the modern novel is a new literary form imported from the west in the second half of the 19th century. The truth of the matter is that the novel as we know today it was associated a large body of narrative in it which not only left its indelible mark on the formation and development of the modern European fiction literature, particularly short story and novel, but also facilitate its adoption among the Arab literary scholars and readers with relish and enthusiasm.³

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the growth and development of Arabic fiction, we find a good number of works written by the Arabs. To offer a glimpse to this matter, an attempt has been made here to shed light there upon with the following discussion especially on the most popular tales, myths and epic romances; they are as follows:

The Thousand and One Nights

The most famous unique collection of Arabic popular narrative, the *Thousand and One Nights* or the modern title 'Arabian Nights' includes tales of adventure, of war, of trickery, and of love, it also set in particular historical period, notable in this category are those devoted to incidents involving the caliph Harun al-Rashid, his famous minister, Ja'far al-Barmaki, and his boon companion, the poet Abu Nuwas.⁴

The Mamluke period gave final shape to the Arabian Nights; a work which is far more popular in Europe than the Quran or any other masterpiece of Arabic literature.⁵ It is interesting to note that the book which remained neglected in its homeland, found recognition in Europe paid special attention to it, and thoroughly studied and translated it into their languages. The main reason was that the Arabian Nights got an important place among the most important pieces of international literature. The European writers started feeling their way towards a new style, and the Arabian Nights Provided them with the model and clue, for which they were searching, for it possessed the two basic qualities, the spirit of adventure and the element of realism, that are indispensable in a popular literature.⁶ The western people were so much attracted by this book due to its great demand in everywhere and were published in England and French more than thirty times in Eighteenth century. In context of the popularity of *Arabian Nights* one of the famous European historians of literature concedes that had there not been *The Arabian Nights*, there would have been no *Robinson Crusoe*, and no *Gulliver's Travels*.⁷

It is clear from the above discussion that though the European fiction is regarded as mother of the modern Arabic novel, was indebted to Arabic literary works that the impact and contribution of the latter cannot be neglected at the time of discussing the origins of this modern literary genre in Arabic language.

Maqama

Maqama (plural, Maqamat) means a place of standing. It is an assembly where people stand listening to the speaker, and in particular, an assembly for literary discussion. This is the classical Arabic literary genre, developed in the tenth century out of a cluster of Arab prose genres which basically comprised all of the education and learning of court circles.⁸ Al- Hamdhani (d. 1008), the title was conferred to him as Badi al- Zaman, i.e. the wonder of the age'. His *Maqama* may be called a romance of literary bohemianism, where he imagined as his Hero a witty, unscrupulous vagabond journeying from place to place and supporting himself by the present which his impromptu displays of rhetoric, poetry and

learning seldom failed to draw from an admiring audience.⁹

The pioneering works of al-Hamdani were acknowledged by many successors like, Abu Muhammad al- Qasim al- Hariri (d. 1122). He expressed in the introduction to his set of *Maqamat* that the basic scenario of al- HamdaniMaqama with al- Hariri remains the same.¹⁰ Many prominent writers were influenced by al- Hariri's *Maqama* during the 19th century in Egypt, Iraq and Syria. Muhammad al-Muwailihi (1858 – 1930) wrote *Hadith Isa ibn Hisham* (1907) (The observation of Isa ibn Hisham) on the model of the *Maqamat*, narrated by a rawi in rhymed prose, each *Maqama* being page or two.¹¹ This trend was prevailed in Arabic literature of the 19th century.

DISCUSSIONS

From the above brief discussion it is clear that the important role played by these two Arabic works was remarkable in the early stages of Arabic fiction, but these works lacked in novelistic setting and characters. With the passage of time modern education entered in Egypt under the guidance of Muhammad Ali Pasha (1805 – 1848), resulted an important change in the writing of genre in Arabic literature. For example, many prominent writers started to follow new trend in the writing of Arabic novel being influenced by the Translation movement i.e. from European works.

It is a well-known fact that in the 19th century a number of factors combined to bring about changes in the creation of Arabic narratives on modern lines. First after the Napoleonic occupation of Egypt (1798 – 1801) and the subsequent establishment of a western inspired ruling dynasty under Muhammad Ali Pasha (d. 1849), Egypt became the centre of the modern Arabic literary renaissance. The freer environment of Egypt attracted several Syrian and Lebanese writers, mostly Christians, who had been in contact with Europe since sixteenth century. Later the impact of the renaissance spread to other Arab countries, particularly Syria, Lebanon and Iraq in the wake of the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War and the coming of independence after the Second World War.

It was in this socio-political environment that initial attempts at fiction in Arabic were made in the form of translation from French and English, followed by original writings. For example, Butras al-Bustani (1819-1883), the founder of first national school in the Levant, and a school for girls, compiled a two volume dictionary arranged in the modern order called *Muhit al- Muhit*.¹² Among his outstanding works the contribution of Arabic encyclopedia *Daira al- Ma'arif*, was remarkable one, but its later volumes were completed by his family. However, al-Bustani translated *Robinson Crusoe* into Arabic in early nineteenth century. Sulaiman al- Bustani (1856 – 1925) translated Homer's *Iliad* with a preface noted for its literary value and was the first introduction of epic verse into Arabic and the translation is a masterpiece.¹³

CONCLUSIONS

Here it may be concluded that Arabic fiction literature has come to the level best in the present modern world. A good number of fiction writers in the Arab world are warded and given due respect. In this connection, The International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF)¹⁴ is one of the most prestigious and important literary prizes in the Arab world. Its aim is to reward excellence in contemporary Arabic creative writing and to encourage the readership of high quality Arabic literature internationally through the translation and publication of winning and shortlisted novels in other major languages.

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¹ A prose fiction longer than a short story but shorter than a novel.

² Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction*, 2nd edi., (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 6.

³ Hamdi Sakkut, *The Egyptian Novel and its Main Trends 1913-52*, (Cairo: American Univ. in Cairo Press, 1971), 13-14.

⁴ Roger Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*, (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), 173.

⁵ Reynold A. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs*, (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969), 456.

⁶ The Legacy of Islam, op. cit., 197-201.

⁷ Ibid., 201.

⁸ Meisami, Julie Scott and Paul Starkey (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, 2 vols., (London: Routledge, 1998), 507.

⁹ Reynold A. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs*, (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1994), 328.

¹⁰ Roger Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*, (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), 163-64.

¹¹ Yaha Haqqi, *Fajr al-Qissa al-Misriyyah*, (Cairo: Al-Hay'ah al-Misriyyah al-ammah li-al-Kitab, 1975), 19.

¹² Ismat Mahdi, *Modern Arabic Literature, 1900-1967*, (Hyderabad, 1987), 14.

¹³ Ibid., 14-15.

14. International Prize for Arabic Fiction, <http://www.arabicfiction.org/> dated 24/06/2016
