
TEXT AND ITS CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

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REPRESENTATION OF NATIONAL FOLKLORE AND CLASSICAL HISTORICAL NARRATIVES IN MODERN YEMENI PROSE

Before speaking about the representation of national folklore and classical historical narratives in modern Yemeni prose it seems necessary to give a very short outline of how this prose was developing in the 20th century.

The beginnings of modern prose-writing in Yemen go back to the 1940s, when after adopting ideas of the general Arab Renaissance movement, or al-Nahḍa, some well-educated Adeni Arabs tried themselves in writing short stories of a didactic kind, in general similar to those short-stories, that had been written in the late 19th century by some Lebanese and Egyptian authors. This didactic style dominated in Yemeni prose until the mid-1950s, when the rapid spread of nationalist and anti-colonial ideas in Aden made local writers turn to social and political issues, and so there appeared a profoundly politicized realist trend. The armed struggle against the British that started in South Yemen in 1963 inspired some authors to start writing short-stories romanticizing heroic deeds of their compatriots.

After the foundation of two Yemeni independent states — YAR and PDRY — the mainstream in national prose changed into realism, but there also appeared a strong modernist tendency, caught up from the Egyptian, Lebanese and Syrian literature. In spite of the fact that the unification of Yemen in 1990 provided the Yemeni with more formal democracy, it also provoked a great deal of resentment, caused by steady deterioration of national economy. This overwhelming frustration pushed some authors into applying post-modernist strategies, using total parody, and paying little, if any, attention to moral and religious norms and smashing all the literary taboos, that had existed previously.

Since the first Yemeni attempts to write modern-style prose in the 1940s were in fact intended to somehow substitute oral folklore narratives and written *sīras* of the medieval kind, popular in traditionalist religious circles, we don't find any signs of folklore or historical narratives in the short-stories of that period. The first occurrence of folklore motives can be traced only in

a few short-stories of romantic kind, written in the early 1970s by two most prominent Yemeni authors: Muḥammad 'Abd al-Walī and Zayd Dammāj. Using the plots of some folk-tales they depicted romantic heroes who fought cannibal-beasts, fantastic or real, like a demon in 'Abd al-Walī's short-story "The Demon" (*al-Ghūl*), a lion and a kind of hyena in Dammāj's "The Night in the Mountains" (*Layl al-jabal*) and "The Beast of al-Ḥawbān" (*Tāhish al-Ḥawbān*) [1]. Other motives apparently taken from national folklore are also apprehensible in some Yemeni short stories of the 1970–80s, though, it should be noted, there are very few stories of the kind.

As for historical narratives, which used to inspire many Arab novelists in the late 19th — early 20th century, in modern Yemeni prose they were not touched upon until very late, as it was also the case in other literatures of the Arabian Peninsula. The first reason for this situation is that Arab readers had already been well acquainted with Arab medieval history due to the novels written by Lebanese writers Salīm al-Bustānī, Jamīl al-Mudawwar, Jirjī Zaydān, Ya'qūb Ṣarrūf and later, in the 1930–40s, by Syrian Ma'rūf al-Arnā'ūṭ and Egyptians Muḥammad Abū Ḥadīd, 'Alī al-Jārim, Muḥammad al-'Aryān, 'Alī Bākathīr. Writers of Arabia, most of them having no profound knowledge of the medieval history, could hardly add anything new to what had already been written, at least at that level of enlightenment writing, where they all were. The second reason — and probably more profound — lies in the political and ideological changes that had occurred in the Arab world itself. Christians al-Bustānī, al-Mudawwar and Zaydān wrote their novels at the time when Arab lands constituted a part of the Ottoman Empire and, rejecting the Ottoman rule, they all were at some extent adherents of Pan-Arabism, which made them turn to the national history of Arabs, where they tried to find sources for general edification and for the development of national consciousness. In the after-World War I Egypt, Lebanon and Syria writers' interest in the Arab