

Arabic Short Story: Origin and Development

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ABSTRACT: This paper tries to explain the origin and development of Arabic short story. In Arabic literature the short story is the youngest of western fictional genres. Like the novel, the short story owes its growth to the influence of European literature. Although it was a new form with no relation to prose genres of the medieval and later periods, the Arab tradition with its rich repertoire of anecdotes short narratives gave a big spurt to the development of the short story. The short story have become the most popular modes of literary expression during the course of twentieth century. At first thousands of short stories were either translated or adapted from French, English and Russian languages by the Arab writers.

Keywords- Badi', Izdihar, Kalila Wa Dimna, Maqama, Qissa, Saj', Uqsusa.

I. INTRODUCTION

The short story was not entirely new in Arabic literature. In Pre Islamic literature there were many stories about the Arabs and their battles, in the *Qur'an* were various tales about the Prophets and the people they were sent to, and during the Abbasid period many stories about foreign nations were translated. Among these *Kalila wa Dimna* and *Alf Laila wa Laila* (One Thousand and One Nights) were most famous. Various versions of the latter crystallized from "Sanskrit and Persian models in the tenth century".^[1]

However, the Abbasid stories and those of the Islamic peoples afterwards were predominantly in the local colloquial languages. They, therefore, did not belong to the classical Arabic literature. The *maqama*, a story that related the adventures of a writer who captivated and fascinated his listeners with his quick-wittedness and eloquence of expression, was an exception. Owing to its importance in the development of the *qissa* (Short Story) and *uqsusa* (Novel), a brief exposition of the *maqama* is appropriate here. *Maqama* is sometimes translated as 'assembly'. The hero of the story, an adventurous, witty, shrewd and well-versed vagabond, gained rich rewards by astounding and enlisting the sympathies of his audience with inventive narratives. In the various situations (*maqama*) of his wanderings around the world, he happened to meet the same acquaintance (also a traveller) repeatedly. The latter is always introduced as the *rawi* (narrator). Badi al-Zaman al-Hamdani, the originator of the *maqama*, and those who followed him like Abu Muhammad al-Qasim ibn Ali al-Hariri, did not intend to create a real story (known as an *uqsusa*, plural: *aqasis*) – their aim was rather educational, namely the compilation of groups of styles embellished with *saj'* (Rhymed Prose) and *badi'* (Metaphorical Style).^[2] The *maqama* was the only connection the novel had with classical Arabic. The tales of the *qissa* were mostly written in the colloquial language, as can be seen in many Egyptian folk stories like *Antara*, *Qissa Hilaliyya*, *Qissa al-Zahir* etc. Many other stories were 'Egyptianised' (that is, written in Egyptian colloquial and with Egyptian names), for example *Alf Laila wa Laila* and the more recent ones of that time by Ali al-Zaibiq and Ahmad al-Danaf.^[3]

II. ROLE OF TRANSLATIONS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF ARABIC SHORT STORY

The role that translations of Western literature played in the progress of the *qissa* cannot be emphasized enough. Being one of the central forces in the evolution of modern Arabic literature, the space devoted to it will not appear excessive. Before the reign of Muhammad Ali, there were no translations from Arabic into other languages; in fact, the entire Mameluke period passed by without efforts to translate, whether from Arabic or Turkish. Nor were there any attempts in the reverse direction. It was through Muhammad Ali's desires and efforts that translation became a cultural and important activity. He also speeded up the whole process by taking the following measures:-

1. If a book, for example, would take three months to translate, he would divide the book into three parts and order three persons to do it so that it would be done in one month.
2. He encouraged the translators by giving each one gifts and financial rewards and by printing their works and distributing them in schools and government departments.
3. On the return of the student delegations from France, he would receive them in his palace and prevent them from leaving until they had completed a translation in their field of study. Thereafter he would order it to be printed by *al-Bulaq* Printing Press and then had it distributed.

4. He followed closely the availability of books on specific topics. Immediately on hearing of one, he would send someone to locate and buy it. He would have it printed in order that people could reap its benefits. Translations were done into two languages, Arabic and Turkish. Books on warfare were translated into the latter because most of the military men and students were Turkish or from the Mamelukes. The rest was translated into Arabic.^[4]

As for the translation of literature from other languages, very little took place during the time of Muhammad Ali. Of the few available were 'The Divine Comedy' of Dante, some books of Voltaire and Jean Jacques Roussouw, and a collection of French stories.^[5] The reason for this seemed to have been that Muhammad Ali was a practical and military man and therefore concentrated on the translation of books which were of practical and military value.

Although the initial 'translation movement' did not include much literature as such, this translation heritage did open the eyes of the educationists, especially during the time of Ismail, to the Arabic heritage of which the *uqsusa* was part of. It impelled them to start translating *Waqai'* and it was the newspapers which were the ideal vehicle (in fact, the only vehicle) to propagate and spread them.^[6] In this respect, al-Tahir and Ismail identified three 'movements': "a party who imitated only their Arab predecessors, a group who emulated only the Western scholars, and a third class of writers-cum-translators who mixed the Islamic/Arabic culture and European arts".^[7]

The Translation of Books:

Besides the many stories which were published in newspapers and magazines, some books were also translated, and it seemed that most of them consisted of collections of stories, some of which first appeared in newspapers as well, and then gathered in book form. The aims of its translation were the same as that for the short stories. Amongst the most famous of these collections were those of Mustafa Lutfi al-Manfaluti by the name of *al-Abarat*. Other well-known collections were Mahmud Taimur's *Ma Tarahu al-Uyun* (What the Eyes See) and Tahir Lashin's *Fi Sakhariyya al-Nas* (The Object of the People's Ridicule). Thus, as H.A.R.Gibb put it: "In addition to journalism and original writing, a vital part in the development of modern Arabic literature was played by the translation of western literary works. These served not only as exercises in expanding the range of Arabic literary expression, but also as models, since not a few translators tried their hands at original compositions of the same kinds".^[8]

III. THE 'EGYPTIANIZING' OF THE QISSA

Rifa'a al-Tahtawi was not only a translator, but also an 'Egyptianizer' of the *qissa*, that is, he translated the Western story into Egyptian Arabic and substituted names of characters and settings with Egyptian equivalents. This 'Egyptianizing' would continue long after him. Subsequent writers did possess the ability and the means to move away from the *saj'* (Rhymed Prose) and *badi'* (Metaphorical Style) of al-Tahtawi and his contemporaries, but because they wanted to satisfy the tastes of their readers, they still clung to the old style and expression. In fact, some writers like Muhammad Uthman Jalal preferred to use the Egyptian colloquial in their *qissa*.

There were, however, those writers who 'Egyptianised' the *qissa* using classical Arabic, thereby balancing the scales. The most famous at the beginning of the twentieth century were Hafiz Ibrahim and Mustafa Lutfi al-Manfaluti. Ibrahim translated, or more precisely 'Egyptianised', Victor Hugo's 'The Wretched'. He did not abide by the original, except to the main story line, but took the liberty of translating freely and adding passages that were not there originally. The works of al-Manfaluti in 'Egyptianising' Western *qissa* was more extensive than that of Hafiz. He did not know anything about the French language, but depended on someone to read the French stories to him, and then he would relate the stories as heard, in Arabic. He would then even change the title, for example translated.^[9]

The Orientalists took a great interest in these *Waqai'* stories like *Alf Laila wa Laila*. They would collect and publish them. Some books appeared to be translations but were not; others which appeared to be original were in fact translations. Some of them did not have the date of publication while yet others did not have the original writer's name on it.^[10]

The two movements, Islamic and *muhajirun*, continued to spread their influence, the latter leaning towards the 'romantic, emotional stories, and the former promoting the 'social *Waqai'* by utilizing the *qissa* as a *maqala* on social issues.^[11]

Some writers exclusively used magazines as a vehicle for their articles and stories. The *maqala* or *uqsusa* printed in this fashion generally did not concern itself with the artistic aspect of the narrative, for there were no central events and the characters were not complete or sketched with due care. Even the titles indicated that they were social issues and not *waqai'*, for example an *uqsusa* would have the title 'Which should get Preference as *Hijab*: a Woman's Face or her Voice?^[12]

IV. TYPES OF QISSA

If one looks at the kinds of *qissa* that evolved, then two types of *qissa* can be discerned: the social *qissa* and the historical *qissa*.

4.1 The Social *Qissa*:

The long social story, which was initiated by Haikal (*Zainab*), would develop and advance by leaps and bounds with Egypt's literary revival after the First World War. Various writers produced original works, all with their own personal style and characteristics that distinguished them from other writers. They typified the new liberal spirit in Arab thought. The most prominent were Taha Husain and Ibrahim Abd al-Qadir al-Mazini. The former excelled in his description of Egyptian life in most of his *qasas* for example *al-Ayyam* (The Days), *Duwa al-Karawan* (The Call of the Plover) and *Shajara al-Bu's* (The Wretched Tree). Other compositions were 'Adib' (Man of Letters, subtitled 'A Western Adventure'), *al-Qasr al-Mashur* (The Bewitched Castle), *al-Hub al-Da'i* (Lost Love) and many other works which he co-authored.^[13] His *al-Mu'adhdhabun fi al-Ard* is regarded as the "apex of biographical literature as far as beauty, effect, style, expression, simplicity and eloquence are concerned ..." and his *Rihla al-Rabi' wa al-Saif* as the "best literary example of travel stories". He treated the well-known story of *Shahrazad* from *Alf Laila wa Laila* in his characteristic skilful and charming style. *Al-Ayyam* records his childhood in the *kuttab* (traditional Qur'anic School), in the Egyptian countryside, then in Cairo, in *al-Azhar*, then in Paris, in the university. In it he describes his thoughts, trials and tribulations, pains, happiness, and his human, social and personal ordeals, making it a stirring character study and captivating social document wrapped in one. *Al-Ayyam* was later written in Arabic Braille especially for the blind so that they, in the words of Husain himself, "will experience in it the life of a soul mate in his youth ... and in reading it, I hope my blind friends will find enjoyment and alleviation from the burdens of life as I have found succor in writing it, and that it will encourage them to face the future smilingly ... and so that they will benefit themselves and others, overpowering all difficulties in their way with patience, diligence, forbearance and never-ending hope".^[14] The publishers brought out this issue "in honour of Taha Husain's great status in our intellectual, literary, social and political life, a status of a leader, pioneer and scholar". 'The Days' were so popular that the first volume was broadcast as a series over Egypt's public radio during the month of *Ramadan*.^[15] It was put to Taha Husain that it seems that 'The Days' was the first autobiography in Arabic literature, but he replied, "It's not the first book, for there was Ibn Khaldun who wrote about himself in his travels; and this reminds me that I wrote the two volumes ... under the same circumstances: volume one I wrote after the publication of *al-Shi'r al-Jahili* and the problems and arguments that followed it ... and I felt dejected and grieved about the unfolding events, so I tried to escape from my depression or to overcome it by writing the first volume. As for the second volume, I wrote it in an attempt to flee from hurtful pain following a verbal altercation with a colleague".^[16]

Husain's significant role in and his substantial contribution to the development of modern Arabic literature is succinctly articulated by Doctor Yahya Shayami: "We have to point out his excellent championship and patronage of the Arabic language and literature. He was a luminary, a thinker, a scholar, a man of letters, a critic, a social reformer. The cultural insight and progressive ideas he introduced into literature made him a pioneering and creative *littérateur*. He wrote several different types of essays and short stories, biographies, descriptive travel stories, histories, even poetry and critiques, ... and his criticisms did not stop at literature, but included politics, society, behaviour and religion. In short, he was a witness to and the flag bearer of the intellectual literary revival of his time. It was, therefore, no surprise that he was one of the five winners of the UNESCO prize for literature in 1973; sadly, the morning of the day that he passed away".^[17]

He would generally become known in the Arab literary world as *Amid al-Adab al-Arabi* "as an honour for the major role he played in the field of literary studies" and affectionately as *Wazir al-Mai wa al-Hawa* "because as minister of education he decreed that education must be free and available to everybody like water and air".^[18]

Ibrahim Abd al-Qadir al-Mazini concerned himself with the psychological aspects of man and woman in his short stories. He derived his subject matter from Egyptian daily life and his own personal experience of that life. He was a fine stylist and could expertly analyze the society, its customs and habits, the relationships amongst the various people, and their temperament, emotions and sensibilities. He acquired this tendency towards psychological analysis from Western psychological writers. Like them, he would propagate the well-known Western psychological theories in his stories, for example in '*Ibrahim al-Katib*' (Ibrahim the Scribe, published in 1931) and '*Ud ala Bad*' (A Return to the Beginning). Gibb, in writing about *Ibrahim al-Katib*, refers to its "defiant cynicism, subtle humour, and crisp and natural dialogue".

Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad wrote a story *Sara* which resembled al-Mazini's taste for psychological analysis. Al-Aqqad's story consisted of extensive analyses of the characters, and his personal attributes of eloquence in expression and clarity in style would predominate in these analyses. Besides *Sara*, which was "a novel ... in powerful and sinewy prose",^[19] he wrote many political, social, literary and philosophical articles

and essays as well as a number of biographies. His works runs into more than ninety volumes.

This type of *qissa* was almost confined to these two authors only. The generation after them, like Muhammad Husain Haikal and Taha Husain, would concentrate on social analysis instead of psychological analysis. After them the foremost writers in this respect would be Taufiq al-Hakim, Mahmud Taimur and Najib Mahfuz.

Tawfiq al-Hakim (regarded by some as the finest Arabic author of the first half of the 20th century) used some events and experiences which he had witnessed in his own life as subject matter, for example in *Yaumiyyat Na'ib fi Aryaf* (The Diary of a Provincial Officer). It recounts in satirical and brilliant language the investigation of a murder by the legal officer and the police. He showed great skill in the use of dialogue, and had the ability to write vivid description in straightforward, yet witty and occasionally poetical, prose. Al-Hakim tried to treat some national problems in *Auda al-Ruh* (Return of the Soul). His stories had the stamp of general humaneness on them, and simultaneously he seriously tried to describe the world of the Eastern, Egyptian soul. He also excelled in intellectual drama (the drama of ideas or fantasies) and social drama.

Mahmud Taimur, again, tackled the shortcomings of Egyptian society in his stories. Although he had his own personal style and character, his works bore a resemblance to that of Husain and al-Hakim. Some selections of his most famous and much-appreciated short stories and narratives, and articles and studies are listed by Muhammad Mahmud al-Bawi. He writes of the Cairo scene, his short stories named in each case after the title and leading characters of one story, for example *al-Hajj Shalabi* and *al-Shaikh Jum'a*.

Najib Mahfuz's stories were concerned with the middle and lower classes of his society. He described the various circumstances and factors at work in the societal environment that sometimes led to deviant personality traits and perverted behaviour. He wrote three historical novels, novels of contemporary life, and a collection of short stories called *H amas al-Junun*. His reputation is based on his trilogy *Bain al-Qasrain*, *Qasr al-Shauq* and *al-Sukkariyya* in which he traces the history of an Egyptian middle-class Muslim family between 1917 and 1944. His attention to detail is brilliant and is skilful in his use of language, "adapting classical syntax fairly freely to suit the modern printed language, with its absence of vowelling. His dialogue is realistic, without using many colloquialisms."^[20]

4.2 The Historical *Qissa*:

Alongside the social *qissa*, the historical *qissa* developed as from the beginning of the twentieth century. Tracing the development of the new forms of Arabic literature, Gibb remarked, "... Some progress was made with the novel, particularly in the series of historical novels in the manner of Scott produced by the indefatigable journalist, essayist, and historian Jurji Zaidan".

Jurji Zaidan compiled some twenty odd historical short stories in which he described all the major events of the Arabs' past. Technically speaking, they were not stories, but history narrated in the form of stories. He incorporated love stories in them (historical romances), and wrote about events without any adaptation and without the analysis of human emotions and circumstances. Maybe this was because "... Jurji Zaidan used the *qissa* as a means to teach Islamic history ... not as an avenue to present Western cultural thought ... and was therefore more a teacher than a narrator ..."^[21] His historical interests were diverse: he wrote separate books on the history of Arabic literature, Islamic civilization, Greece and Rome, Modern Egypt, Britain, pre-Islamic Arabia, and even Freemasonry in Egypt, prompting Gibb to retort, "It is fully open to question whether his activity was not even more effectual than Muhammad Abduh's in leading contemporary Egyptian literature along the path which it has followed".

Shortly after World War One this type of *qissa* would ripen and progress. The first to produce a perfect, artistic historical *qissa* was Muhammad Farid Abu Hadid with his story *Zanobia*. He followed it up with other stories: *al-Malik al-Dalil wa al-Muhalhil* (The Misguided and Flimsy King), and then *Juha fi Janbulad* (Juha in Janbulad). In all his stories he applied the principles of the *qissa* very skillfully, and described its characters with deep penetration into their hidden, inner spiritual and psychological being. Many other capable writers, like Ali al-Jarim, Muhammad Sa'id al-Aryan and Muhammad Awad Muhammad would write in the same vain.^[22]

V. THE *QISSA* BECOMES FULLY ARABIC

Another unexpected factor led to the further growth and blossoming of the *qissa*: a political and economic war of words broke out between Europe and Egypt. This was the time when Egypt was still under British occupation. The Mediterranean Sea was sealed off, some historians maintained, to choke Egypt's economic development that was booming at the time due to the trade route through the Suez Canal. Trade would go around The Cape of Good Hope instead of through the Canal. The result, besides the economic ones, was that no Western literature would come to Egypt and the Egyptian writers began to depend on themselves much more than they did previously. The *qissa* grew profoundly in content and style because the writers no longer relied upon inspiration from the West. They depended on and used their own Egyptian Arabic

environment. The *qissa*, therefore became an Arabic and indigenous art in an Egyptian milieu, not an imported Western art measured by and based on Western examples and models.

The number of able writers would also increase tremendously after the final revolt of 23 July 1952 when Egypt successfully evicted the English from their soil. The last English soldier would leave Egypt in 1956. All of these writers found themselves after the victorious uprising and started to eloquently express Egyptian life, with its concomitant social, political and economic events, in the most beautiful and captivating *qissa* imaginable. Today there are many prominent, innovative Egyptian short story writers, the *qissa* has a distinct Egyptian flavour, and each writer has his / her own personal style, methodology and way.

The tendency to 'Egyptianize' Western *qissa* before World War One had ended. It was replaced by a new taste in professional, precise translations. Many publishing houses, societies and foundations played a major role in this respect, for example *Lajna al-Ta'lif wa al-Tarjama wa al-Nashr* (The Committee for Writing, Translation and Publishing), *Dar al-Hilal* (Crescent Publishing House), *Dar al-Ma'arif* (Publishing House of Information and Education). Even the Ministry of Education and Teaching played a significant and meaningful role in this regard.

The consequence was that Egypt attained a huge amount of genuine, original Western *qissa* and, likewise, gained genuine, original Egyptian *qissa* that were no less beautiful and charming than their Western counterparts.^[23]

VI. CONCLUSION

In tracing the development of Arabic short story as new forms of Arabic literature, it was essential to go back to the beginning of the nineteenth century (and sometimes to even earlier periods) to put the development in its true perspective. The focus was on the major political events that had a direct bearing on the topic. Referring back to past events and people was also necessary to put Mustafa Lutfi al-Manfaluti's literary works and his vital contribution into context. In other words, the discovery of new forms of literature and their evolution, and the author's contribution, are inseparable from the efficacious historical factors and conditions in Egypt before, during and after the nineteenth century. These factors and influences gave impetus to the genesis of the new forms of literature and to the emergence of a writer like al-Manfaluti. Arab intellectualism was Westernized by the introduction of European culture. In fact, Arabic culture became involved in "a conscious and dynamic conflict" with Western culture, and "Out of this conflict between East and West modern Arabic literature was born".^[24] Consequently, traditionalism and modernism, instead of clashing with each other, had run parallel to each other in modern Arabic literature.

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