

A SURVEY OF NORTH AFRICAN PROSE FICTION

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Abstract

The African continent is divided into four regions which include the East, West, South and North. These regions had different colonial experiences which equally influence the nature of literature that emanates from them. This paper therefore is a survey of the Prose Fiction from only North Africa so as to unravel the mind of the authors from that region particularly in terms of their thematic construct. This will enable us to ascertain whether their prose fiction actually reflects their pre-colonial, colonial and post colonial experience.

Introduction

A survey of North African (Maghrib) prose fiction is the focus of this paper. This implies a general examination of the prose fiction in the region. However, for a better appreciation of this prose fiction, it is necessary to have a good knowledge of the various factors that have influenced their literary works in general and prose fiction in particular.

North Africa is one of the four regions that make up the African continent. Like the other three regions – West, East and South – it has also passed through the different experiences of pre-colonial, colonial eras. The Maghrib was colonized by both the French and British governments. In this regard, its experience is almost similar to that of the other regions most especially that of West Africa. It is also pertinent at this point to state that the Maghrib is dominated by Arabs having Islam as their major religion. Before the Islamic invasion, the inhabitants of the Maghrib had semblance of unity, but when the majority of them embraced Islam, they came to have a common cause under the canopy of religion.

In the Maghrib, nationalistic manifestations appeared in the opening decades of the nineteenth century. The inhabitants of the region had been for centuries an intensely fierce people, aware of their radical and national identity. Egypt was the centre of nationalism in Mediterranean Africa and she inspired the nationalist leaders from the rest of the Maghrib. The stream of experiences resulting from the policy of assimilation, oppression, economic deprivation and socio-political discrimination led to violence becoming a characteristic of the nationalist movements in the Maghrib, most especially in all the three territories colonized by the French government – Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria. Apart from the general chaotic situation of the region, individual countries still have their peculiar problems. For example, the history of Morocco, in the 19th century was dominated by internal revolts resulting from a lack of an acceptable rule of succession among the Alawites. Sudan was characterised by agitations and protest against specific government policies and actions. Evidence of similar situation was there in the other countries of the Maghrib region.

On the literary history, Lichtendter (1975) in his book *Introduction to Classical Arabic Literature* said that what is being referred to as Arabic literature is a complex and vast body of writing that dates back to many centuries, and a variety of branches and subjects. It does not embrace only the works of the Arabs as a people or of the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula where it originated. After a religious awakening, inspired by prophet Mohammed, the Arabs streamed forth beyond the confines of Arabia; they took their language and the new religion with them thereby creating the literature that has become Arabic literature.

The development of Arabic literature covers three distinct periods. The first period is called the "Jahiliyya". This is the period before the birth of prophet Mohammed. It is the period before the advent of Islam. The term "Jahiliyya" itself means ignorance, a term which support the view that Arabs at that time were ignorant of God. The literature of this period is largely oral traditions such as proverbs, folklores and poetry. The second stage of development is the period during and after the advent of Islam. This Islamic period marked the beginning of written Arabic literature. Writing of this time include the Koran –the Holy Book of Islam, commentaries on it, biographies of leading ancient scholars and vast body of tradition of the prophets as well as common law. And one thing that is very predominant in the literature of this period was its deep attachment to religious themes. The third stage of the development of the Maghrib literature is the modern period. Heywood (1971) submits that this period is usually believed to have began with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798, thus acknowledging the role of the West in providing the initial impetus. The chief modern forms are: novel, short story, and drama. In addition, mention should be made of other creative forms such as biography, autobiography, literary criticism and a large body of literature which for want of better term may be called polemical.

Modern Maghrib literature developed under violent political, social and intellectual upheaval. Hardly were the Arabs liberated from Turkish domination than they were subjected to British and French control. Western technology was introduced, also western doubts and vices. The young educated Arabs became skeptical of his own heritage. Therefore he wondered whether all these changes could be reconciled with Islam. These new changes in society necessarily alienated the average Arab established order and this created a cleavage between the collective ideal and what existed as the new reality. The young elite were confronted with trying challenges. Understandably, writers drew inspirations from the dynamics of their societies and respond artistically and appropriately. Suffice to say that a general disillusionment found articulate expression in the works of novelists from the region.

Textual Analysis

Having give a background of the political and literary history of the Maghrib, a random survey of the prose fiction from the region will be undertaken to see how various experiences have been portrayed in the different texts chosen

for this paper. However, it is pertinent at this point to acknowledge the fact that of all the world's considerable contemporary literature, that in Arabic must be the least known, which is one very good reason why the Arab mind remains something of a mystery to the westerners and the world at large.

Tayeb Salih is one of the novelists from the Maghrib. His first novel *Season of Migration to the North* which is one of the texts chosen for this paper depicts village life in the years before and after the independence granted by the British and the problems of post colonialism. *Season* also goes beyond a simple rejection of the European invasion and legacy. It offers a stunning critique of cultural segregationist moods by exposing the Sudanese culture of oppression that predates the British intrusion

The major thematic construct on which the story of *Season* revolves can be seen from the perspective in which Salih celebrates the pre-colonial cultures but also exposes its evils such as the different forms of the oppression of women and its consequences on the individual and society. He also touches on the potential benefit that comes with colonialism, full of noble ideas that embrace all and equally squeeze to death.

On the issue of colonialism and the attitude of the colonizers who exploit the African-Sudanese for their own benefit, the narrator says:

The English District Commissioner was a god... They would employ us, the junior government officials who were natives of the country, to bring in taxes (Salih, 1980:53)

This implies that the people were colonized in their own country, employed as cheap labourers of government, and used against their own people to collect taxes by forces thereby creating bad blood among them.

In the same vein, the African leaders who took over power from the colonialists who were expected to make life more meaningful for their people, but who now do the reverse by behaving like the colonizers by spending millions of money in organizing fruitless conferences is equally brought to focus in this novel.

The idea of oppression, subjugation of women, and their relation to the neocolonial structure along with the doctrine of Islamic religion that gives man the liberty to marry up to four wives and to divorce them at will is also highlighted in the novel. Mahjoub in his conversation with the narrator says "You know how life is run here... women belong to men, and a man's a man even if he's decrepit." The subjugation of women and their rebellion against such oppressive order that had been in place since Islam came to the region climax in the incident that happened between Hosna and Wad Rayyes. In *Season* Wad Rayyes clearly personifies the objectifying and abuse of women as property that is traditional to the culture. After the death of Mustafa Sa'eed, Hosna – his wife resolves not to remarry again but to devote her life to the up-bringing of her two sons. In the third year of her widowhood, Wad Rayyes indicates his interest to marry her. He went to her father and brothers who agreed. Since her late husband left her in the care of the narrator, Wad equally went to him and implored him to

help carry the message to Hosna. The narrator advised Wad against the idea, but he refused to see reason with the narrator. When Hosna is informed about Wad's intention and that her father and other members of her family had agreed, he said "If they force me to marry, I'll kill him and kill myself". (PP.96)

When the narrator had returned to his place of work, the family of Hosna forced her to marry Wad Rayyes against her will. For good two weeks in the house of Wad, she refused to talk to him nor allowed him to come near her. When Wad could no longer bear it, he attempted to force her and a fight ensued between them in which Hosna, in furtherance to her earlier statement to the narrator, stabs Wad over ten times and equally stabs herself, leaving the two of them dead (127). The significance of this incident is that though Hosna is dead, no longer can a woman be looked on merely as property or raped without second thought.

From a Crooked Rib by Nuruddin Farah is the second novel chosen for consideration in this discourse. The plight of women in Somalia is the subject of Farah's first novel *From a Crooked Rib*. It also deals with the manner in which traditional assumptions among women obstruct their emancipation. The novel primarily focuses on the uneducated nomadic Somali woman called Ebla, her quest for freedom from the patriarchal tyrannies of fathers and husband and her bid for personal independence. The novel published in 1970, shows marked sympathy for the oppressed Somali womanhood.

From a Crooked Rib raises some cultural questions of whether a woman should be circumcised; whether she should have some say about whom she would marry; whether she should be a partner in a polygamous marriage, where she stands if her husband wants to divorce her. Rather than suggesting a compromise of old values and the new, this novel calls for the emancipation and empowerment of the women.

The main character of the novel Ebla – which means graceful – is a member of Jes (a unit of several families living together). She lost both parents when she was very young. She couldn't remember anything about them. She had always been entrusted to the care of her grandfather. The position of culture and the oppression of women, in Somalia is demonstrated in the character of Ebla when her grandfather gave her out in marriage to Giumaleh – a man who is old enough to father her without Ebla's consent. In this state of despair, Ebla plans to escape. But being a rational being, she questioned herself about this desire and she convinced herself that the escape is to free herself from all restraints from being the wife of Giumaleh, to get away from unpleasantities, to break the ropes society had wrapped around her and to be free and be herself.

In examining the nature and place of women in the society Ebla said:

...But why is a woman, a woman? To give companionship to man? To beget him children? To do a woman's duty? ...surely a woman is indispensable to man, but do men realize it? ... A man needs a woman. A woman needs a man. Not to the same degree? A man needs a woman to cheat, to tell lies to, to sleep with... But Giumaleh is the wrong

match, she suddenly told herself, I definitely can't marry him (Farah, 1982:13)

Again, in her conviction, she told herself that her escape meant her freedom, a new life, and her divine emancipation of the body and soul of a human being. On a general note, Ebla questioned the rationale of human existence in line with the existentialist philosophy of ambivalence, futility, vanity, uncertainty, and the nothingness of human nature when she said:

One dies only once, and only when one's time, comes. Nobody knows when Time will knock on his door. And when it does, it will be welcome (Farah, 1982:15)

This shows the superiority of the transcendental over the immanent.

In the bid to emancipate herself Ebla escaped to a town called Belet Wene where she located a distant cousin whose name is Gheddi and his pregnant wife Howralla who welcome Ebla into their house. Few days later, Howralla gave birth and Ebla was turned to a house-help. After few months of Ebla's stay, luck ran out of her cousin in his business and he began to experience some financial difficulties. To help himself out of the situation, he gave Ebla out in marriage to a "broker" called Dirrir without her consent – what drove Ebla from her grandfather has happened again. The discussion between another character in the novel who is a widow and Ebla further confirms the abuse of women in the Somalia society. "... But that is what we women are – just like cattle, properties of someone or other, either your parents or your husband..." (Farah, 1982:80)

In her agony and revolting situation in her cousin's house, Ebla tries to unravel the secret behind the superiority of men when she said:

Naturally women are born in nine months... just like men. What makes women so inferior to men? Why is it a must that a girl should refund a token amount to her parents in form of a dowry, while the boy needs the amount or more to get a woman? Why is it only the sons in the family who are counted? For sure this world is a man's – it is his dominion. It is his and is going to be his as long as women are oppressed, as long as women are sold and bought like camels, as long as this remains the system of life. Nature is against women" (Farah, 1982:84)

Farah has said that he is interested in people who are deprived of what they cannot exist without, and in the personal struggle for survival. In the Somalia of his first novel, marriage is the woman's principal, and in some cases, only means of survival. The combined constraints of tribal patriarchy, Islamic law, and the hardships of nomadic pastoralism ensure that only in marriage is their space for individual woman self-definition. Thus Ebla, who loves to be a wife, challenges her polygamous husband with short-lived polyandrous experiments of her own, although she hardly achieves any relief from her subjugated status. Indeed, Farah has said that he used women as a "symbol for Somalia" precisely because when the women are free, then and only then, can one talk about free Somalia. No nation can be free when half of its people are

still slaves, or when their identities are defined and their positions negotiated by husbands, fathers and brothers. Farah is, in any case, a subtle and elusive writer who treats the problematics of nationality and gender in a way that avoids drawing up categorical parallels and oppositions. It is only through a wishful effort of the allegoric imagination that the downtrodden but irrepressible Ebla, in *From a Crooked Rib*, can be translated into an image of the nation groping its way towards independence.

Naguib Mahfouz's *Children of Gebelawi* (1985) and *Mirama* (1978) are the novels chosen from Egypt for this survey. *Children of Gebelawi* is an allegorical novel offering an essentially pessimistic view of man's struggle for existence. In this novel, Mahfouz made use of Myth and archetypal characters and several ideas about humanity and the problems which plague man in his society. It is account of the spiritual struggle and social history of man through the ages.

Mahfouz has been able, through the introduction of the problem of existentialism to question the significance of religion. His treatment of this theme can be compared to that of Richard Wright in his novel *Black Boy* (1945). In this novel, Wright sees religion as a tool of the whites, used in subjecting the blacks to perpetual ignorance. The point of difference in these two works is that while Mahfouz sees religion as irrelevant in a modern age, Wright sees it as a tool of oppression.

The vision of society as presented in *Children of Gebelawi* is gloomy. The author sees the society as decadent and corrupt. Violence both physical and mental reigns supreme. The novel presents the experiences of a people against the background of social and political corruption. The people are deprived and dispossessed of their rights. All these are attributed to the excesses of the ruling class who perpetuate a lot of evil in the society. The affliction of the poor and the dispossessed are depicted with passionate intensity and bitter resentment which reflects the novelist deep concerns with the question of equality and injustice. His social vision is accentuated in the 'prologue' where the people of the alley say: There is our ancestors house. We are all his children and we all have a right in his estate, why should we be hungry and wretched? (1) This statement sets the tone for the rest of the work.

From the above, it is quite obvious that the issue of women's oppression (as dictated by the Egyptian culture) and their emancipation are alluded to in the novel. This is evident in the statement of Kassem when he says:

If God grants me victory, I shan't stop women from sharing the income of the estate... Our ancestors told me through his servant that the estate belongs to everyone. Half the people are women; it is amazing that the alley doesn't respect them; but it shall respect them on the day that it knows the meaning of justice and mercy (Mahfouz, 1959:234).

On the whole, *Children of Gebelawi* is thus a series of chronicles of the myth of man, an allegory of the beginning and fall of man and his attempts to reach back for his lost world through a recourse to myth. It is also an existentialist novel about man's grappling with the problems that confront him in

his society problems that are attributed to both the transcendental and the immanent.

Miramar, Mahfouz's second novel chosen for this survey concerns itself with recent political upheavals, the corruption and decadence in the Egyptian society, especially the Revolution of 1952, though the political undertones date back to the time of Sa'ad Zaghloul (1860-1927) who was the driving spirit behind modern Egyptian nationalism. The story is set in a little hotel, the Pension Miramar, in the heart of the city of Alexandria. The pension is run by a middle aged woman. The novel is woven round Zohra, a naïve peasant girl from the rural countryside, whose naively represents the innocence and purity of the old Egypt. She runs from the tyrant of a Grandfather who wants to marry her to a man older than herself. It is significant that the other characters who are intellectuals revolve round her and it can be seen that they all in one way or the other tend to exploit her either by seeking her friendship or wanting to marry her. Zohra adamantly turns down these attempts. This selfish exploitation is symbolic of the political and historical exploitation which is glaring on every page of *Miramar*. The typical Arab view of the woman is one which does not give her a place in the scheme of things. So Zohra tries to emancipate herself from this male chauvinistic society by running away to the Pension and working to earn a living for herself, and getting an education.

The views of Evelyne Accad on the role of women in the contemporary fiction of North Africa and the Arab world reflects Zohra's situation. She (Accad) comments that at every stage of her life, the Arab female is the victim of oppression and mistreatment at the hands of the father, the brother, the husband, and the omnipotent male society. As a baby she says the female is nursed half as much as her brother. In certain tribes, the girl undergoes before puberty, the excision rite (circumcision of females), this is to reduce or preclude the girl's sexual desires, to ensure that she will arrive at her marriage bed intact, and to make her completely passive as a sex partner. At puberty she is withdrawn from school and placed under virtual house arrest until she can be safely married off. Very young, sometimes as a child, she is married off to a man chosen by her father. As a wife she must very often share her husband with other rivals-Islam allows polygamy up to four wives and concubines, she owes total submission to her husband who is allowed to beat her and to repudiate her at will. She is expected to give birth in the first year of her marriage and to bear sons. If before her marriage, she loses her virginity or if she commits adultery as a married woman, the social pressure bears heavily on her brother to kill her and to wash the family's honour in blood. Thus the story *Miramar* reaches the reader on a level of common humanity and transcends the purely Egyptian context, evoking dilemma shared by all mankind and females in particular.

Generally, Mahfouz's views of man's struggle for survival between social and personal good is essentially pessimistic. The problems which Mahfouz presents are common to all humanity – life and death, religion and materialism, communism and capitalism, time and change and estrange human relationships.

Man and society are characterized by a long struggle in a hostile world which ends in hopelessness, despair and tragic death. War and strife are rampant. Man's existence is also presented as a kind of search, in which time and change play an important role.

The characters in the two novels of Mahfouz treated above are presented as contending with a historical past which weight them down and suppresses change but the truth is that they are in a world of change. One finds then that the settings, situations and characters, no matter how purely Egyptian they are, are basically archetypal and universal, an allegory of man and society. These novels are greatly psychological in their appeal and sociological, in their presentation of certain human cultural patterns in society. It is equally sociological in the sense that they reflect the social and cultural pattern, the historical lays, political struggle and the life style of the typical Egyptian. In *Children of Gebelawi*, we get a taste of Egypt's historical past as Mahfouz takes the reader into his Egyptian vanished world. It reflects the struggle of the people of Egypt against despotic rulers and the unfinished revolution of Egypt.

Conclusion

It should be noted that nothing can be more mistaken or indeed too strong than to minimize the contribution of North African writes to the development of African literature in general. As could be seen in this paper the survey of North African prose fiction reveals the exalted position of men and the subjugation of women as their main thematic preoccupation. This is brought about by the strong, harsh and unquestionable influence of their culture which was imposed on them by the Islamic religion. These features therefore make the North African prose fiction to be unique and worthy of study. There is also the insistence on the fact that Africa must be seen and understood from her own point of view as a people who have a recognizable history, culture, religion and world view. The prose fiction from this area is a major step in providing a perspective for the North Africa future, to help eradicate the legacy of colonialism: the poverty, disease and illiteracy which Africans suffer from today despite the fact that they live in one of the richest continents of the world.

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