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Writers and Poets as the Forecasters of the Arab Revolution of 2011. Preliminary Remarks

Abstract

The article is devoted to Arab writers and poets from countries involved in the Arab Spring, whose works discuss the social and political problems, and highlight the specific issues their countries of origin are facing. The article discusses works published before 2011. Therefore, these are not the echoes of the revolution, but are considered by readers, the literary community, and literature researchers to be prescient of the coming revolts which have so dramatically changed the political map of the contemporary Near East.

Keywords: Arabic poetry, Arabic fiction, Arab Spring, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria

In Arabic culture, words have always had particular significance, especially if these were the words of a poet. Poets have always enjoyed a special status in these communities, even in pre-Muslim times, and a fight with words frequently equated to a fight with swords. Poets were the ones to predict, comment, and ultimately write about events. It is therefore not surprising that the Arab Spring also has its poets and writers – those who predicted it and those who recorded and continue to record its literary picture, which apart from its historical narrative, will survive for generations. Until now, this problem has not been considered separately. Most frequently these works are included in the category of “revolutionary” literature, but in the author’s opinion they are of a different quality. Therefore this article is focused on these works but will be limited to *high* literature. As a consequence, the authors of rap lyrics¹ – created in dialects – as well as stories

¹ This problem has been covered by a significant number of serious papers; compare articles by M. Peterson, C. Rooney and B.J. Harbert in: *The Arab Avant-Garde. Music, Politics, Modernity*, ed. Th. Burkhalter, K. Dickinson, B.J. Harbert, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown 2013; H. Aidi, *The Grand (Hip-Hop) Chessboard. Race, Rap*

transmitted by modern *rawīs* – which belong somewhat more to modern oral tradition rather than literature, are beyond the scope of this article.

Arab critics and readers, when viewing this situation from a certain perspective, attributed the features of a political *prophecy* to a number of literary works. It is clear, that we should understand the word “prophecy” here as a metaphor. The list presented in the article is certainly not a definitive list of works that can be described as “prophetic”. However, I do mention works that have appeared most frequently in this context present in literary criticism over the last few years. This is the reason why only a selection of titles and authors are the subject of this article.² The researchers that reach the deepest while remaining in the context of the country where the Arab Spring originated, refer to a revered writer of modern Arabic (Tunisian) poetry, Abū al-Qāsim aš-Šābbī (1909–1934) and his famous poem, *The Will to Live (Irādat al-ḥayāt)*, regarded by supporters of Arab revolutions³ as the earliest foretelling of the events in 2011. So tradition participates in a live dialogue with modernity.⁴ This is the beginning of the poem:

“If the people one day will to live
then destiny must respond
and the night must disappear
and the chain must break.
Those who never been cuddled by the passion of life
will evaporate in its air and perish.”⁵

The Egyptian poet, Aḥmad Fu’ād Nağm (Ahmed Fouad Negm, died 2013), who wrote in the Arabic vernacular, was regarded as the bard of the 2011 revolution before anyone ever considered a revolt. While through his poems he participated in the events in At-Taḥrīr Square, he had been calling for reforms for many years before.⁶ Together with him were many other poets and writers, both those living in their respective homelands as well as those who lived abroad. It must be emphasised here that the latter enjoyed far more freedom of expression. It would be hard to omit the works of Abd ar-Raḥmān Munīf (1933–2004),

and *Raison d’État*, “Middle East Report” 2011, no. 260; S. Fernandes, *Close to the Edge. In Search of the Global Hip Hop Generation*, Sydney 2011.

² For this reason, this choice may seem arbitrary.

³ I use this word as literary convention, though I have no doubt that the “Arab Spring” actually was not a revolution in political and historical sense. However, this is not the place to discuss this issue at length.

⁴ M. Aboeazz, *1001 Images from Tahrir Square: A study of intertextuality and dialogicality in protest messages*, <https://brismes2012.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/mariam-aboeazz-1001-images-fromtahrirsquare.pdf> (23.03.2016); *Abu al-Qasim al-Shabi: The Poet of the Tunisian and Egyptian Revolution*, https://docs.google.com/document/d/176PHh0ZV15GB0L_yUYyBnWMH3sL68l6qJVHUXzIqIw/edit?hl=en_US (27.07.2015).

⁵ Abū al-Qāsim aš-Šābbī, *Aghani al-hajat*, Dar Šādir, Bayrūt 1997, s. 218; English translation by S. Ouederni, <http://voiceseducation.org/content/about-qacem-echebbi> (23.03.2016).

⁶ H. Hendawi, *Ahmed Fouad Negm, Egypt’s ‘poet of the people,’ dies at 84*, “The Washington Post”, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/ahmed-fouad-negm-egypts-poet-of-the-people-dies-at-84/2013/12/03/ffe2df32-5c51-11e3-95c2-13623eb2b0e1_story.html (27.07.2015).

full of internalised rebellion and unrest, such as the famous trilogy *Cities of Salt* (*Mudun al-milḥ*, 1984–1989; English translation 1987–1993). In conversations with Arabic scholars it becomes clear that, for some, such a timeless predictor of the revolution is the Nobel Prize winner, Naḡīb Maḥfūz (1911–2006). His works are undoubtedly outstanding, but it would be hard to speak of predicting a revolution here if they were made over the course of half a century.

Works with a revolutionary voice were appearing in various countries and were ascribed either the function of a prediction for an all-Arab *awakening* or a revolution in their respective countries. This restlessness residing deep in the hearts of Arab writers can be seen, for example, in the works of the Egyptian writer, ‘Alā’ al-Aswānī (Alaa Al Aswany), who may be somewhat over-hyped but undoubtedly noteworthy. It is believed that some of the people who came to At-Taḥrīr Square did so after reading his books, the most famous of which is without doubt *‘Imārat Ya‘qūbiyān* (*The Yacoubian Building* 2002, English translation 2007). The foreshadowing of a revolution can be deduced from all the works mentioned herein; however, they do not mention it directly and therefore can only be mentioned as symptomatic.

One of the best-known works that predicted the revolution, and published in the 21st century, is the novel *Yūtūbiyā* (*Utopia*, English translation 2010) by Aḥmad Ḥālid Tawfīq (Ahmed Khaled Tawfik) from 2008.⁷ The author, a distinguished writer and translator, mainly of science-fiction literature, paints a dystopian picture of Egypt in 2023. The country is divided between the poor, and the rich who live in an enclosed city called Yūtūbiyā, walled in to keep out the rest of this desperately poor society. There is no space for a summary of the plot here. The most important point is the last image in the novel: the inhabitants of Šubrā, the borough inhabited by the poor, take up arms and storm Yūtūbiyā, which is protected by American Marines. The results of the poor’s uprising are unknown, but it sends a clear message that gives hope. The prose-prophets also include (in the eyes of some critics) Ḥālid al-Ḥamīsī (Khaled Al Khamissi), whose novel *Taxi* (2007, English translation 2008), is a form of introspection into Egyptian society in the first decade of this century.

The Tunisian literature of the years just before the revolution was abundant in such themes of settlement the most interesting of which were the works of Kamāl ar-Riyāḥī. His novel *Al-Miṣrāṭ* (*Scalpel*, 2006, English translation of fragments 2010) is mentioned most frequently in the context of “revolution predictions”. This novel is not political, at least on the surface – it refers more to social criticism, especially criticising the attitudes of traditional Tunisian society to women.⁸ Despite that, the readers and critics concur that

⁷ Discussion of this novel: compare D.R. Khayrutdinov, *Ahmad Khaled Tawfik’s Novel Utopia as an Important Example of the New Wave of Science Fiction in Arabic Literature*, “World Applied Sciences Journal” 2014, No. 31; M.M. Dziekan, *Egipska dystopia. O powieści Ahmada Chalida Taufika Jutubija („Utopia”)*, „Ethos” 2014, No. 107.

⁸ K. ar-Riyāḥī, *Al-Miṣrāṭ*, Dār as-Sāqī, Bayrūt 2006. F. Abdallah, «*The Scalpel*» of Kamal Riahi; *women’s bottoms unveil the society*, <https://kamelriahi.wordpress.com/2013/06/18/the-scalpel-of-kamal-riahi-womensbottoms-unveil-the-socie/> (09.08.2015).

this work has shed new light on phenomena silently omitted until then, and is therefore regarded as a voice calling for change.

There are also works that were published immediately after the first signs of unrest – that is works published in early 2011, including Kamāl ar-Riyāhī's novel *Ġūrīlā* (*Gorilla*) from 2011. The protagonist is a poor, black man who guards the tomb of Habib Bourguiba and, who in late August 2011, climbs a metal clock tower built by Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in honour of himself, having demolished all statues of his predecessor, the creator of modern Tunisia. The novel has many plot threads and contains numerous elements of criticism directed at the political and social situation in the country. The novel ends with the “Gorilla” receiving an electric shock and falling from the tower, which is a direct reference to the *auto-da-fé* committed by Muḥammad al-Bū'azīzī.

For Tunisians, another important work that foreshadows the revolution, but at the same time is a again a form of settlement, is the novel by Ḥusayn al-Wād *Sa'ādatur as-sayyid al-wazīr* (“His Excellency the Minister”). It was written many years before the revolution, but it could only be published after the victory in 2011. The protagonist is an ordinary man, a teacher, who to his own surprise suddenly becomes a minister and is drawn into the machinations of a system he cannot leave. His term of office is very short – once he completes the task the dictatorship has set for him, participating actively in all possible scandals, he faces up to what he has done. He attacks the president and his family, and ends up in a psychiatric hospital, where he is killed as a traitor and a plunderer of the country's wealth.⁹ The novel vividly depicts the corruption of those in power and their disdain towards society – the factors that became the key elements which contributed to the Jasmine Revolution.

The pre-revolutionary reality in Syria is described in a well-known novel by Muṣṭafā Ḥalīfa (Moustafa Khalifé) *Al-Qawqa'a. Yawmiyyāt mutalaṣṣiṣ* (“Shell. Memoires of a Hidden Observer”) from 2008. Its protagonist, a graduate of film studies in France, is arrested at Damascus airport and imprisoned without charge for the next 13 years. It is a partially autobiographical novel, containing descriptions of the infamous Syrian prison of Tadmor (Palmyra). Moustafa Khalifé was never politically active, but was arrested as a result of being denounced by one of his colleagues with whom he had studied in Paris. The protagonist of this novel *wrote* it in his head, and only committed it to paper once he was released from prison. This novel remains one of the most important works of Arabic prison literature.¹⁰

⁹ *Sa'ādatur al-wazīr tarakkub iḥtimār al-ḥilm*, <http://www.emaratalyoum.com/life/culture/2013-03-13-1.556988> (08.07.2015).

¹⁰ Review of the book: Sh. Taleghani, *Book Review: A Memoir-Novel of Tadmur Military Prison*, “Syrian Studies Association Newsletter” 2009, vol. 14/2, <https://ojcs.siue.edu/ojs/index.php/ssa/article/view/374/282> (12.07.2015). About prison literature: compare C. Elimelekh, *Arabic prison literature: resistance, torture, alienation, and freedom*, Harrasowitz, Wiesbaden 2014; A. Abbas, *Więzień polityczny we współczesnej powieści irackiej*, in: A. Abbas, A. Maško (ed.), *W kręgu zagadnień świata arabskiego*, Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu, Poznań 2015, pp. 147–165; A. Graczyk, *Zniewolenie ciała – wyzwolenie umysłu. Obraz więzienia we współczesnej irackiej powieści autobiograficznej*, in: *ibid.*, pp. 167–176.

Another aspect of *prophecy* is represented in the novel of a Syrian female writer of Kurdish descent, Šahlā al-‘Uğaylī. She was born in Ar-Raqqā, the present capital of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS). Shortly before the jihadists took over the city, Al-‘Uğaylī published an historical novel *Sağğād ‘ağamī* (2013, “Persian Carpet”), in which she describes the historic events which uncannily resemble the current events unfolding before our eyes. A new governor comes to the quiet town of Al-Raqqā, which lies between Iraq – torn with political infighting, and Syria, which is falling apart. His main aim is to find the *Book of Fātima*, which was supposed to have survived and is somewhere in the town. The events described by the writer very closely resemble that which are now happening in this area, an area occupied by men blinded by warped religious ideas and a desire for absolute power. Al-‘Uğaylī depicts each morning of Al-Raqqā’s inhabitants from centuries ago as if she were writing about yesterday or today: “The city’s inhabitants woke up every day to new murders and punishments. They went to bed not knowing if the next day they would wake up in their home, in a prison or maybe somewhere on a road.”¹¹ This is today’s reality of Al-Raqqā, the reality of the land overtaken by the Islamic State, one of the consequences of the Arab Spring.

In early 2011, the Egyptian book market witnessed the appearance of a small collection of poems by a relatively little-known Egyptian poet, Usāma al-Abnūbī, who was making his publishing debut. The title of the collection was rather ambiguous, but it is not clear if this was the intention of the author: *Al-Barādi’ī wa-al-ḥimār*, or “The Saddlemaker and the Donkey” – the author did not manage to find any comment by the poet on the title’s ambiguity. It is possible that once the revolution was in motion, the collection was ascribed this double meaning – as the first word of the title is also the last name of Mohamed El-Baradei, who initially had the ambition to play a significant role in Egypt’s political life after the fall of Mubarak, while Mubarak was frequently nicknamed a *donkey*, a supposed reference to the former dictator’s stupidity. By a miracle, the collection survived strict censorship, and after the social unrest spilled onto the streets and unseated Husni Mubarak in the process, the poems were lauded as “a collection which prophesied the revolution” This was at least the opinion of authors of numerous articles and notes on the subject,¹² predominantly quoting one of his poems which is regarded as one of the most important in the collection. The poem is entitled *Ūlā awwal* – which can be translated as *From the Beginning*. The poem itself is, however, difficult to translate, because the bitter words describing the Egyptian reality intertwines with Arabic grammar terminology, which is also the basis of word play. The poem is written in the form of an answer given by a student during a lesson of Arabic:

¹¹ N. Sulaymān, *Huḍriyyāt riwā’ijja fi at-tārīḥ wa-at-turāṭ as-sardī*, “Al-Arabi” 2015, no. 4, p. 87.

¹² „*Al-Barādi’ī wa-al-ḥimār*” – *ši’r tanabba’a bi-qt-ṭawra*), <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/cultureandart/2011/2/6/-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%A8%D8%A3-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AB%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A9> (28.07.2015); this is rather a free interpretation of the poem because it is impossible to render in any translation all the word-plays of the Arabic text.

“Oppression, Sir, is the subject,
 Poverty is the direct object.
 Dreams we can have only in the third person,
 And life is cheaper here than an oat flatbread.
 Justice has died, it’s a zero subject,
 The law is broken, there is nobody to defend it.
 Free is the one who is passive, or he and his children
 Howl deep in their souls locked in dark dungeons.
 The accusative case has run away with our blood –
 Give it our money too, may it give it wings!
 Theft is an epithet of beggary without work,
 And a clerk is a synonym for an old beggar.
 A pound is not exchanged anymore,
 With it I can pay the butcher or the traffic cop.
 Change of the Constitution – today, this is the vocative case!
 I spread the news – I can only give this much in my testament.
 America has become the indirect object, do not ask what or how,
 And our government is only a wretched, movable suffix.”¹³

The poem quite aptly reflects the mood in Egypt in 2010. The atmosphere was heavily laden with not so much the need for rebellion but with one of resignation. There is more pain than anger, but ultimately, as it is known, anger won and led to the flight of President Mubarak and the subsequent changes – both in the country as well as in Egyptian literature.

The German Arabic scholar, Stefan Milich, points to the Iraqi aspect of the issue being discussed here, and claims that the fall of Saddam Hussein and the subsequent events in the region were predicted by the Iraqi poet, ‘Adnān aṣ-Ṣā’iḡ as early as 1999, in his poem entitled *Ḥikāyat waṭan (An Episode from the Homeland)* which he recited in Malmö:

“The statue of the president was really rather bored
 and so it climbed down from its golden pedestal.
 It turned its back on the delegations,
 the flowers and the choirs of children
 and began to mingle with the people,
 who instantly called to it,
 ‘With our souls, with our blood
 we sacrifice ourselves to you, oh ...’
 That made the statue feel slightly better
 but when the other statues found out

¹³ Ibid.

they too climbed down to the ground
 and began to charge at one another.
 And the people watched
 and did not know
 who was the true president among them.”¹⁴

The poem is extraordinary in that the poet not only much earlier predicted the Arab Spring but also the changes which occurred in the Arab world when predicting the fall of Saddam Hussein and his monuments, which became a reality four years after the poem was published. According to the author of this paper and many other scholars, the spark that ignited the Arab Spring was the war in Iraq, Aṣ-Ṣā’ig foreshadowed the beginning of the processes which directly or indirectly caused the political changes in the Arab Near East, not by indicating a date, but a specific turning point – the destruction of Saddam Hussein’s monuments. The battle between them can be interpreted as a fight between various interest groups for Saddam’s inheritance. This was exactly what happened and continues to this day.

In Libyan literature there was a dearth of writers who would overtly criticize the Gaddafi regime. However, an artist with just such ambitions is definitely Hisham Matar, an emigrant writer whose works are in English. In his novel, entitled *In the Country of Men* (2006), he describes the terror in Libya – the plot takes place in 1979, but one can easily compare it to more recent times. The novel in the view of the author of this paper, although generally praised, does not present any significant value as a source of information, but is rather a typical record of life and tragic events in a country ruled by a dictator, although one cannot deny the sheer artistic value of this work.

As stressed in the title of the article, I consider this text as an initial insight into “revolutionary” and “post-revolutionary” Arabic literature. Therefore, the above examples show that literature – by fulfilling its most important social duty – accompanies all events in societies and cultures. However, it does not merely accompany but also shows these processes through an artistic filter. Despite the role that this literature plays as a mirror, it does act as a living historic source for posterity which both readers and scholars can draw upon. Literature is an integral part of society, and it cannot even be excluded from discussions on politics just as it cannot be omitted in any other manifestations of intellectual life. One can see this even as the *revolutions* of 2011 begin to fade (Egypt) from memory or never lead to anything positive (Libya), or transform into an inconceivable tragedy of millions (Syria). Maybe in time – just as in the case of the poem by Abū al-Qāsim aṣ-Ṣābbī, which despite being written many years ago, is still valid in its message – some of the works mentioned herein will become a clarion call for another *revolution*. And maybe this time one will write this word without having to use italics.

¹⁴ S. Milich, *An Uprising of Words*, Qantara.de, <http://en.qantara.de/content/literature-and-the-arab-spring-an-uprising-of-words>; *Ar-Rabī’ al-‘Arabī... zuhūr tawrat al-kalimāt*, Qantara.de, <http://ar.qantara.de/content/ldbwlrbylrby-lrby-lrbyzhwr-thwr-lklmt> (23.03.2016).