

LITERATURE AND IDEOLOGY:
EARLY ARABIC SHORT FICTION IN ALGERIA

by

AIDA BAMIEH

The revival of Arabic literature in Algeria started with the efforts of a group of Arabists who first centered around the paper *Ash-Shibab* (established in Constantine, 1925) and later in 1931, founded the Association of the Muslim Ulama of Algeria. Appalled by the low standard of Arabic language in their country and alarmed by the assimilatory policy of the French administration, they undertook a campaign for the national revival of their people, in the religious and linguistic fields.

Working under the leadership of Abdel-Hamid Ben Badis, the Ulama were a non-political group concerned only with the preservation of the national heritage, but their motto: *Islam is my religion, Arabic is my language and Algeria is my country*, disturbed the French authorities who saw in it a latent danger. From the latter's point of view, the teachings of the Ulama ran against French policy which claimed that Arabic was a foreign language and France the homeland of the Algerians, Algeria being a mere province of France. In truth, however, the Ulama had merely an educational mission, avoided politics and refrained from antagonizing the government by openly declaring their allegiance to it, until events pushed them into the midst of the political arena. Ironically enough, it was after the celebrations in 1930 of the centenary of French occupation of Algeria when the French political leaders declared and firmly believed that all went well in Algeria, that the Ulama shifted from a position of neutrality. The celebrations were, predictably, carried out without any consideration for the feelings of the indigenous population; huge sums of money were spent on the festivities while demands for financial help to improve the living conditions of the natives had been refused or totally ignored.

It is through the national Arabic press sponsored by the Ulama that the revival of Arabic literature was made possible. In addition to *Ash-Shibab*, the Association of the Ulama established, in 1936, a second paper *al-Basa'ir*. Born in the shade of the Association of the Ulama, and with their support, literature defended and promoted their policy to a large extent. Many of the writers were themselves members of the Association or teachers in its schools. Yet, this cultural renaissance was

of a special character as it showed a great interest in poetry, particularly in classical Arabic poetry, and left a very narrow margin to creative writing especially prose. Due to the presence among the Ulama of an Algerian poet Mohammad al-Eid Khalifa, new modern poems appeared on the pages of *Ash-Shibab*. Prose works were slower in appearing.

The predominance of verse over prose can be explained by a number of factors. Poetry, in addition to its appeal to the Arab mind and emotions, was not extinguished during the French occupation of Algeria; its easy memorization made its oral survival possible. Prose writing, on the other hand, particularly the novel and the short story, could not survive or flourish in a clandestine atmosphere. Writing a novel or a short story is an elaborate process which requires time and adequate political and social conditions. It should also be added that, in any case, those two literary genres were new in the whole Arab Middle East.

Although the first Arabic short story to appear in the press of the Ulama was published in 1926,¹ it was not until 1935 that a noticeable and important production of short stories started. They were characterized at that period and till almost the beginning of the war of independence, by their direct concern with the political and social problems of the country. They reflected the prevalent situation with a high degree of fidelity that was all the more harmful to the artistic quality of the work they served, however, to channel the ideas and teachings of the Association of the Ulama, helping thus to widen the range of the reform movement and making the precepts of the Ulama more appealing to the average person. This role must in no way be depreciated, especially if we take into consideration the firm punishment that the French administration imposed on some of the short story writers whose influence threatened its policy.² The fact is that the short story, under the cover of symbolism, was able to communicate messages that might have jeopardized the existence or activities of the Association. Yet, from the purely artistic point of view, the short story suffered greatly since committed works, in order to remain above preaching, didacticism, popular slogans and political speeches, must attain a delicate and careful combination of fiction and reality; but the short story failed to achieve that harmony. Since, to a large extent, the short story conformed to the general policy of the Association of the Ulama, with a few exceptions of divergence from the general trend, it is naturally against this background that it should be studied.

One of the main aims of the Association was to counteract the assimilation policies of the French administration, a

tendency which explains the stress that Ben Badis put on Islam and Arabic in his campaigns. He wanted to revive the Algerian sense of integrity in an Arab Islamic frame, much on the line of Muhammad Abdu³ and Rashid Reda⁴ in Egypt. The Ulama concentrated their efforts on the Westernized Algerians because they presented a double danger: they themselves would be lost to the Algerian nation, and they would easily influence the 'untouched' compatriots. Students of French schools were depersonalized under the influence of Western civilisation; in order to reclaim them and win them over to the Arab-Moslem environment the Ulama formed youth clubs (nawadī), or cultural circles, in different parts of the country. The Ulama, in fact, faced a critical situation as far as the Algerian youth was concerned. Encouraging progress would have pushed more youths towards modernism, and condemning it would have antagonised the modern nationalist Algerians. An acceptable medium had to be found and this formed the theme of a number of short stories which aimed at the moral rearmament of the young generation. Zuhur Wanisi, a woman short story writer, explained the fanatical religious nature of the short stories at the time as being a common tendency which presented also "...an element of challenge vis-a-vis the French and the Christians and a solidarity with the Moslem Arabs, which attitude led to a greater attachment to religion in an emotional way."⁵

One of the first and most virulent campaigns launched by the Ulama was that against the brotherhoods, particularly the Marabouts and the hypocritical shaikhs in general. They were denounced both as exploiters of the people in the name of religion and, indirectly, for their collaboration with the colonial power. Ali Bakr As-Salami denounces this situation in his story "Dam atun 'Ala'l-Bu'asa!"⁶ The tone of his story is that of the Ulama's sermons; he calls the Marabouts devils and pseudoshaikhs. The hero of the story is a man who lost his fortune in donations to their activities but whom they did not help when he was poor and in need. Another writer Reda Huhu, portrays a hypocritical and exploiting shaikh in "Ash-Shaikh Zarruk".⁷

The French administration in Algeria made use not only of the brotherhoods but also of some Imams whom were appointed to its official mosques. Those Imams were the subject of a virulent attack from the Ulama, and formed the subject of a number of short stories where they are extremely ridiculed and mocked. Probably the most sarcastic comments come from Reda Huhu as can be seen in this dialogue he has with his donkey.⁸

The donkey said: 'Let's talk about religion...'

I said: 'Which religion?'

He said: 'Islam.'

I said: 'I understand; but do you want to talk about the religion of the government or that of the people, the official religion or the independent religion, al-Asma'i's⁹ religion or al-Ibrahimi's!¹⁰

He said: 'Strange...do you have six religions?'

I said: 'We have two religions...an official religion supervised by the government and headed by al-Asma'i, and an independent religion in which the people believe and for which al-Ibrahimi serves as Imam.'

In another short story by the same author, the official Imam is described as being an actor on a stage.¹¹

Pilgrimage too came under the surveillance of the administration. Fearing an awakening of the Algerians through their contacts with other Arabs during the pilgrimage period, the administration rarely granted them visas to the Hijaz. Yet, lest it be accused of injustice and religious suppression, it solved the problem by sending its official delegation of pilgrims. But those did not receive a kinder treatment from the short story writers than did the Imams. Huhu accuses them of being more seduced by the prospect of a free journey than the religious nature of their task, and of behaving like tourists while on pilgrimage.¹² The issue seemed to have raised a general campaign against the pilgrims; some pilgrims were criticised for being insincere, going to Mecca only to be called 'Hadj' and multiplying their pilgrimages, in order to boast about them. Those two attitudes make the subject of a story by Ibn 'Ashur, "Min Hadith al-Hudjaj fi'l-Dakakin" (Of the conversation of Pilgrims in the shops)¹³ In another story entitled "Hudjaj fi Makka" (Pilgrims in Mekka)¹⁴ Ibn 'Ashur is critical of those pilgrims who do not lead an exemplary life worthy of their title. In the same story, however, the author diverges to another topic which, in all probability, was the center of the activities of the Ulama at the time. He pleads the cause of Arabic language in Algeria in view of the difficulties raised before its teaching by the French administration. This is an instance of the direct role played by

literature in the struggle of the Ulama against the colonial system. The Ulama resented government interference in Islamic practices while complete freedom was given to Christians and Jews. In attacking the official Imams the Ulama found themselves indirectly opposing the ruling power; relations between the two became tense and the Ulama were forbidden to preach in certain official mosques.

As already mentioned, one of the main preoccupations of the Ulama was the assimilation of the Algerian youths, particularly those receiving French education and those working in France. The concern was so great that the topic became the center of interest of the writers, and their anger led them into sermon-like stories aiming at the education of the people. In "Fi lailat al-Milad" (On the eve of his birthday)¹⁵, Hasan Kawaymiyya merely explains the mission of the Prophet Mohammed. The heaviest blow, however, falls on the French schools; Ibn Ashur denounces them as a source of vice¹⁶, and 'Abd al-Mahid al-Shafi'i blames them for all the permissiveness witnessed in the Algerian society.¹⁷

There are instances in the history of the Arabic short story in Algeria when the writers, motivated by their principles, did not hesitate to adopt a line different from or even against the interest of the Association of the Ulama. An example of this attitude is the campaign launched by the short story writers against the wealthy Algerians and their exploitation of the poor people. The situation was somewhat embarrassing to the Ulama who depended on subsidies from their rich supporters to run their schools. Poverty, however, was too important and severe a social evil to be disregarded by the writers; they bitterly denounced the exploiting Algerian aristocracy and the European settlers as well. As usual, the sharpest criticism comes from Reda Huhu who condemns the rich as being slaves to their vices, with no hope for redemption.¹⁸ In the correspondence page of *al-Basa'ir*, he exhorts a young man to hate the rich Algerians, "...be patient my son and hate our rich people with all the strength of your young heart; they deserve it."¹⁹ Other writers adopt a more pitiful attitude and describe poignant human situations. "Min Tarikh Bu'asa'ina" (Of the history of our miserable people)²⁰ describes the mortal fate of three Algerian travellers who, unable to afford the bus fare, travel on foot. Surprised by a snow storm during their journey, they take refuge in a small hut where they light a fire to cook a meal. Unfortunately, the hut catches fire and the travellers, fearing the punishment that would be inflicted on them, run away and spend the rest of the night under a tree. The next morning they are found frozen to death. An example of the

exploiting Algerian is given in "Min Suwar al-Bu's" (Examples of misery)²¹ Poverty is also viewed as a consequence of the occupation of Algeria, since the people lost their land as a result of the government policy of sequestration aimed at punishing the insurgents; but the land was eventually handed to the European settlers who exploited the Algerians and employed them as cheap labor. "Al-Mahrumun fi'l ard at-Tayyeba" (The deprived in the good earth)²² contrasts the poverty of the Algerians to the wealth and prosperity of the European community settled on their land. Abd al-Madjid al-Shafi'i gives an example of exploitation in his story "Kissa min Samim al-Waki" (Stories from real life).²³ where both a worker and his wife are abused. The stories describing the poverty of the Algerians abound and it is impossible to name them all; each throws some light on a different aspect of society, be it the wish of a young shoe shine boy to have a brand new pair of shoes,²⁴ or the disappointment of a merchant whose business comes to a standstill because his clients have lost their jobs and can no longer purchase from his store.²⁵

There is an extremist attitude on the part of most of the short story writers, whether supporting or condemning a policy which characterizes most of their works. Although damaging to the purely artistic aspect of the stories, this can be understood if we take into consideration the long period of suppression endured by the Algerians as a result of the colonization of their country. Their desire to express themselves was so great that once they had the chance to do so, they poured their criticism and their anger pell-mell, sometimes in total disregard of the artistic requirements of a literary work. This has been their attitude in their sorrow and in their joy because even after independence, when writers were recalling the years of the fight and the torture inflicted on the civilians, the same nervous attitude characterizes their works; their stories are summaries of interesting events and incidents rather than carefully thought out and artistically planned works. Few are the stories which do not fall into this category.

Though artistically poor, the short story did play a positive role in the national struggle of the Algerian people. At a time when their representatives found it difficult and sometimes impossible to discuss their grievances, when national leaders were tracked and jailed, the Algerian writers either in French or in Arabic, appointed themselves spokesmen of their people or their 'lawyers', as Mohammed Dib used to say.²⁶

Their commitment to the national cause became their primary concern and the short story was only a means, not an end, a tool to achieve their purpose.

The short story writers adopted two different attitudes in their approach to their topics: some camouflaged their criticism of the political situation and the colonial rule in symbols and subtle allusions, whereas others were very straightforward. The best example of the second case is Reda Huhu who did not refrain from making the most daring comments either on the social or the political situation against the Algerians or the French administration. His attitude is clearly illustrated in the dialogue he has with his donkey concerning the General Assembly, describing its members as dumb and useless.²⁷ In the same frank way he criticises the political activity in Algeria which is felt only on the eve of the elections.²⁸

Another writer, Al-Jalali,²⁹ shows much more subtlety in his works; he relies on symbols and allusions to convey his ideas. In "Al-Sa'id fi'l Fakhkh" (The hunter in the trap) the suppression of the Algerians by the colonial power is referred to in the expression of the author's envy for the freedom wild animals enjoy in the forest.³⁰ He uses irony and a certain sense of humor to comment on the poverty of his people, contrasting it to the progress of Western society.³¹ He is probably the least didactic of the Arabic short story writers.

It is interesting, in view of the important role played by the Algerian woman during the war of independence, to examine the attitude of the Ulama towards her and see whether anything was done to prepare her to take an active part in the liberation of her country or the reformation of her society. Apart from a modest share in education the Ulama, guided by the spirit of the Salaf, did not contribute anything to the emancipation of the Algerian woman. Sufficient is this advertisement which appeared in *al-Basa'ir*, in July, 1939: "The administrative council (of a sports club in Constantine) decided to organize a literary competition among the Algerian writers, to compose a novel on sports, excluding feminine characters and aiming at the popularization of sports among the Algerians..."

Whereas most writers agreed on, at least, an elementary education for girls, they were divided on the question of her freedom. Some wanted her to remain in the house; others, however, were in favor of some independence but they also realized that this would require first education for her and then a change in the mentality of man.³² Huhu, for example, believes that an ignorant woman would go astray in society.³³

He is the author who showed her most sympathy and compassion. He dedicated his novelette "Ghadat Um al-Kura" (The young lady in Um al-Kura)³⁴ to her, writing: "To her who lives deprived of the blessings of love..the blessing of education ..the blessing of freedom. To the miserable, neglected creature in this world, to the Algerian woman, I present this story, as a consolation and comfort."

In one of his numerous conversations with his donkey, Huhu describes the Algerian woman as being a mere "reproduction machine".²⁴ While advocating education for girls, most writers made it clear that they wanted them to receive an Arabic, Moslem education. Both in Wanisis "Man al-Mahin" (Who is the offender?)³⁵ and Al-Shafi'i's "Bayna Fatatayn" (Between two girls)³⁶ the blame for the misdemeanour of the girls is put on their French education.

The stress on education for girls could be explained by the important number of Algerian men married to French or European women. Their excuse has been that the illiteracy of the Algerian women makes it impossible for them, the educated ones, to marry illiterate women and be happy. Those mixed marriages not only deprived many Algerian girls of a chance for marriage but also accelerated the assimilation of the Algerians, as Western wives were believed to have a strong influence on their Algerian husbands.³⁷

It must be mentioned, before ending this rapid glance at the Algerian short story written in Arabic, that the writers also discuss topics of general interest outside the field of action and the program of the Association of the Ulama. The most important works are those of Reda Huhu who speaks of love, marriage, human vices and virtues. Another, though less important work, is al-Habib Banasi's *Sarkhatu'l Kalb* (The cry of the heart)³⁸ where the author describes mainly his childhood and youth reminiscences. But this move towards more general and less committed topics did not come before the fifties, when the struggle for independence was well on its way and the Association less hazardously involved in the political life of the country.

It can be concluded, as a result, that the writers saw their role as defenders of the national cause as ended. The first years of the war did see a diminution in the literary output of short story writers, and it was not until after independence that a new, abundant literary activity started, concerned almost solely with topics revolving around the war. But they consisted mainly of reminiscences and memories of events and incidents, feelings and reactions in specific situations. The role of the short story as activator of nationalism had ended with the War of Independence.

Footnotes

1. Ali Bakr Al-Salami, "Dam'atun ala'l-Bu'asa" ('A tear for the miserable'), *Ash-Shibab*.
2. The most dramatic action taken against one of the Algerian short story writers was the assassination of Reda Huhu in very obscure circumstances in 1956.
3. Muslim theologian, founder of the Egyptian modernist school.
4. Egyptian modernist theologian, admirer of Thu-Tayiniyya.
5. Opinion expressed in a special interview with the present writer. (Algiers, July, 1970).
6. *Ash-Shihab*, October 18, 28, 1926.
7. From his collection *Namathej Bashariyyah*, 'Human Samples,' (Tunis: Silsilat Kitab al-Ba'th, 1955).
8. "Sa'ah ma' Humar al-Hakim," *al-Basa'ir*, January 1949.
9. An Imam appointed by the French administration.
10. The president of the Association of the Ulama. He was appointed after the death of the founder, Ben Badis.
11. "Ma' Imam," *al-Basa'ir*, October, 1951.
12. "Sidi al-Hadj," *Namathedj Bashariyyah*.
13. *al-Basa'ir*, September, 1950.
14. *al-Basa'ir*, January, 1952.
15. *al-Basa'ir*, January, 1950.
16. *al-Basa'ir*, May, 1950.
17. *al-Basa'ir*, March 23, 1956.
18. "al-Fukara," *al-Basa'ir*, August, 1947.

19. "Barid Humar al-Hakim," *al-Basa'ir*, December 26, 1949, p. 3.
20. Ahmad ben 'Ashur, *al-Basa'ir*, February, 1950.
21. 'Aber Sabil, *al-Basa'ir*, January 30, February 13, 1953.
22. A. Gh, *al-Basa'ir*, November 26, December 3, 10, 17, 24, 1954.
23. *al-Basa'ir*, April 11, 1955.
24. Zuhur Wanisi, "al-Ummiyah," *al-Basa'ir*, March 11, 1955.
25. Muhammed Guenanech, *At-Tarik*, nos. 4, 5, 1955.
26. Mohammed Dib is an Algerian writer, poet and novelist who writes in French. (See the article on North African Novels in this issue - Editor.)
27. "Ma' Humar al-Hakim," *al-Basa'ir*, January 1949.
28. "Humar al-Hakin," *al-Basa'ir*, February, 1949.
29. A short story writer and teacher in the schools of the Ulama.
30. *Ash-Shihab*, June, 1935.
31. "Ba'da'l Mulakah," *Ash-Shihab*, February, 1936.
32. 'Ashur, "An-Niswa fi'l-Shari'," *al-Basa'ir*, September, 1951.
33. " 'A'isha," from his collection *Namathedj Bashariyya*.
34. Constantine, 1947.
35. *al-Basa'ir*, May, 1955.
36. *al-Basa'ir*, March, 1956.

