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**Reality, Dream and Hallucination in the Literary Works
of Muhammad al-Qurmuti**

Abstract

Muhammad al-Qurmuti is one of the most eminent of Omani writers. He was born in al-Buraymi in 1955. He is the author of a single volume of short stories, entitled *Sa'at ar-rahil al-multahiba*, which was published in Muscat in 1988. The unequivocally innovative and surrealist short stories that are contained in the volume are filled with the spirit of decadence and catastrophism. And here also the echoes of the philosophy of Schopenhauer, Bergson and Nietzsche are strong. This collection is an excellent example of how well western philosophy, thought and art has acclimatized to the Arab world. Muhammad al-Qurmuti presents the reader with an 'exciting hour of travel' to the land of dreams, desires, illusions, and hallucinations, to a world in which the possible will within a second cease to exist.

Problems of an existential nature enjoyed a sizeable degree of popularity in Omani literature of the 1990s; these concerned questions of living and the purpose of man's existence in the contemporary world. One can mention among the artists that went in this particular direction: Muhammad al-Qurmuti, Muhammad al-Balushi, Yunis al-Akhzami, as well as Ali al-Ma'mari and Yahya al-Mundhari. The work of these writers is often difficult to analyze. They aim to influence the reader's imagination through unusual associations; often on the border of reality and dream or even hallucination. The real world, as it were, dovetails with the spiritual, life with death. The authors often reject chronological narrative, reaching for new means of expression, using retrospection, streams of consciousness with interior monologue; within the narration there is used both direct and indirect speech.

These writers intended to create a new literary reality through the liberation of the writer from the rules of logical thought via the intuitive and spontaneous expression of thoughts and internal experience. They often intentionally distorted the image of the world which was, in their opinion, the terrain for the struggle of the spirit with materiality, or good with evil.

The creative process for them is the recording of the flow of human thoughts and associations which result from the sub consciousness of the creator. Their work, freed from traditional ties of the logic of cause and effect, becomes a set of incidental pictures, a game of associations from the very borderland of dream and reality. Thus, the fictional statement supposes that the source of the reader's knowledge is not reason, but soul; and not acquired knowledge, but an inspired vision. Therefore the perception of a work cannot result from a mechanical analysis of its content, but through the deciphering of the author's thoughts thanks to a spiritual receptivity.

Muhammad al-Qurmuti, despite his modest output, is one of the most eminent of Omani writers. He was born in al-Buraymi in 1955, and went to school and studied in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt. He is the author of a single volume of short stories, entitled *Sa'at ar-rahil al-multahiba* ("The Exciting Hour of Travel"), which was published in Muscat in 1988. The unequivocally innovative and surrealist short stories that are contained in the volume are filled with the spirit of decadence and catastrophism. All of these currents and trends were quite popular in the 20th Century within western cultural circles. And here also the echoes of the philosophy of Schopenhauer, Bergson and Nietzsche are strong. This collection is an excellent example of how well western philosophy, thought and art has acclimatized to the Arab world. Al-Qurmuti's short stories probably play a similar role in contemporary Omani literature to the works of Schulz, Gombrowicz or Witkacy in Polish literature.

Muhammad al-Qurmuti presents the reader with an 'exciting hour of travel' to the land of dreams, desires, illusions, and hallucinations, to a world in which the possible will within a second cease to exist. We are not afraid however to go aboard his plane, and to fasten the seatbelts of oblivion. Our guide will be the narrator and the main hero at the same time, an unknown and undefined "I". A man condemned by fate to eternal wandering and loss somewhere on the border of reality and dream, yet imprisoned in his body by cruel civilization. The world in which he lives is a prison. Tortured he dreams of death. He confides in us: "A black cloud covered my eyes. It took away from me all my senses. It left me only hallucinations which attack my mind and they horrifically torment it"¹. "I tried with great doggedness to drive out those alien, stubborn and obsessive thoughts"².

"Although I was aware of the fact that the world was soon to cease existing, I felt a great sense of relief. There remained only those spectres which constantly flit before

¹ Muhammad al-Qurmuti, *A ma zilta ta'ihan, ayyuha al-musafir in: Sa'at ar-rahil al-multahiba*, Muscat 1988, p. 78.

² Idem, *Hajar walid bi-ittijah*, op. cit., p. 22.

me like mad things. I quickly started to assemble and order my thoughts, so that I could stand face to face with my fate”³ or: “I travel here and there, but even so I am alone, far from my memory and weakness. I set out between the open towns and the moment which extends the desire for a mysterious departure. A departure to where I would be able to differentiate night and day. Everything became one moment between hunger and desire. It became a certain death. For death is but a moment, and I do not know what this loss is still for”⁴.

The pain of existence is for the narrator a torment that cannot be tolerated. He yearns for posthumous peace and freedom. He wants to be a liberated man. He knows that this is possible because he has experienced this in his dreams where he has travelled beyond the gate to the world. We do not expect that a journey with such a guide will be an easy matter. It will be undoubtedly a journey full of impressions, and we will have to bring ourselves to make a great intellectual effort in order not to get lost. For the guide is not going to tell us everything clearly, in fact he will hardly say anything clearly. He is going to confuse us in his utterances, in the utterances of others; he has spoken of extremely varied strange things.

Ecriture automatique (“automatic recording”)⁵, the uncontrolled stream of associations and interior monologue, is the way in which the narrative is presented in all of Muhammad al-Qurmuti’s short stories. This type of narrative which requires from the reader great patience, vigilance and self-abnegation, is very easy to lose oneself in, and to give up on. *Ecriture automatique* is “sport for the intellect”. The narrative border between reality and dream, between truth and fairy tale, between reality and nightmare, between sobriety and intoxication is very flexible and enigmatic.

“Tomorrow I will go to school as every day. I can’t stand it. We the pupils will meet the teacher there. We will have six classes with him from the very beginning to the end of the day. He always sits in his seat and doesn’t get up even for a moment. He repeats the lesson exactly like a tape recorder; he doesn’t even alter a single word, not even a letter. I thought of him how he stands in the middle of the class and tells us about the endless power and might of God. At such a moment I can genuinely pray to the Almighty God, like a real believer. My curiosity was stronger than I was and I asked him in all my naivety: And who created God? On hearing the question the teacher almost fainted and slumped to the floor. I checked his body to make sure he was still alive. My how he lost his temper that blood rushed to his head. He had flushed cheeks like an old donkey carrying a great weight upon his back. One could see in his eyes that he wanted me to strike him in the face, but I crouched so much that I was almost invisible. I knew that I had made a mistake and had sinned. The teacher shouted: You have no right to ask such a question, you are a heathen. Now God will be bad for us and you, he will

³ Idem, *Shabab al-hisab*, op. cit., p. 48.

⁴ Idem, *A ma zilta ta’ihan, ayyuha al-musafir*, op. cit., pp. 78–79.

⁵ *Słownik terminów literackich* [“A Dictionary of Literary Terms”] ed. by J. Sławiński, Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków, 1998, p. 119.

punish us, destroy our school. At that moment I felt unbelievably pleased with myself. I felt as if I had overcome the whole of the animosity.”⁶

“Night came and immediately a half moon appeared, it distorted its neck as if it were dancing in a country circus. And the sky is going to be all full of waves of the cries of thunder which will finish at dawn with the light of the lightning of Cinderella dreaming at the bottom of the pigsty. Sleepy people filled their tired skulls with pieces of dream and not one of them knew whether to awake or not. Cinderella decided to play with fate therefore she escaped into the world of dreams where the prince is organizing a great ball; he chooses a servant and Cinderella. The prince falls in love with her even though he had never seen her before. Maybe it happened because of her slippers, and maybe he fell in love with the slippers. Cinderella dreamed of a rest, maybe about resting forever. At a certain moment of the night silence restores his joy. The joy awoke the princess running straight to the heart of the beloved prince. And so night changed itself into one great big conspiracy. And so night starts to destroy the prince’s and his subjects’ kingdom until the moon burns out. Then my daughter comes to me; her face was young and fresh. She laid her head on my breast. We were silent for a long time”⁷.

Sometimes, however, the narrator helps the reader by giving him certain pointers. This usually happens when “I” starts to dream, or has some new hallucination or other. He then says: “I suddenly saw myself, as if in a dreamy vision”⁸, “Suddenly I glimpsed myself at the end of some road or other”⁹, “I saw how I fell into a deep hole, the sort left by earthquakes”¹⁰, “I saw myself at the edge of illusionary graves”¹¹. With the help of just such a means of narration the guide leads us around a world of the absurd and paranoiac. Around a world where time does not exist and the places which are to be found there and which we visit are somewhere but one does not know where. They do not fit anywhere on Earth, they do not even have names: “He asked about the name of the place, he was interested whether it was a town, a tribe or a school. They answered him that life is here a green sky. Does that mean that here a tribe has no leader, and a school no headmaster? No. Is there no one here who collects contributions and payments? No. And no one picks up lovers? No... No... Stop talking rubbish”¹². One can not specify the time and the place of action in such a case. For a thing happens now and never, everywhere and nowhere. The title hour that appears in many places is rather a contractual hour. No one really knows how long it lasts for. It is not even known if it is a measure of time or something totally different. For in a surrealist world things perform a new, imagined function.

⁶ Idem, *Masa’ al-jum’a*, op. cit., pp. 61–62.

⁷ Idem, *Al-Qarar*, op. cit., pp. 26–27.

⁸ Idem, *Sa’at ar-rahil al-multahiba*, op. cit., p. 87.

⁹ Idem, *Shabah al-hisab*, op. cit., p. 49.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 50.

¹¹ Muhammad al-Qurmuti, *A ma zilta ta’ihan, ayyuha al-musafir*, op. cit., p. 77.

¹² Idem, *Masa’ al-jum’a*, op. cit., pp. 65–66.

In *Al-Qurmuti*'s short stories time passes differently. As if in a dream, the seconds, minutes, hours and years can change in an instant, time is deprived of linearity and chronology. It is subordinated to the psyche, imagination, flow of thoughts and loose associations of the hero. Events do not have to occur one after another, they do not have to form a chain of cause and effect. The time planes crisscross each other and overlap. The poetics of the sleepy dream disregard logic and likelihood. The dimensions and contours of space in this world are blurred. The laws of physics are replaced by liberated visions which are ruled by desires, dreams and nightmares, and that constitute opposition to the former. As everything takes place in the hero's imagination this world is one with extremely fragile bases for existence. One can say that it would disappear if the said "I" was to stop dreaming.

In each short story, which we can consider to be one adventure, in fact we 'experience' several of them. The short story is composed of several smaller fragments. They are characterized by a lack of any logic whatsoever, which results from the author's use of collage. Absurdity rules within the content and structure of the short story. It provokes, shocks, it often arouses disgust. We are confronted with something that we are simply unable to comprehend: "He ripped off a piece of his liver and placed it in a glass full of red wine..."¹³, or "Along the side of the boat there lay coffins. I have no idea where they came from or how they got there. Coffins without dates, names, and addresses. I saw how a child broke away from her mother's grasp, opened up one of them, ripped off a piece of the corpse and dipping it periodically in salt devoured it"¹⁴. The identity of people and things is doubtful and ambiguous in the world of sleep and dream. People and objects undergo shocking changes: "I looked around. I looked around and I saw worms that were starting to eat my body, and within an instant I was a skeleton. After a while the worms disappeared. There remained only two. They sat next to my head – one to the right, the other to the left. They transformed themselves into policemen with many horns, eyes, tongues and lips"¹⁵. In certain short stories the narrative "I" calls forth in his monologues images from childhood. They create the myth of happy childhood. A child's happiness, according to him, depends on the child living a full life that is authentic and open. An adult brings with him limitation through convention and social norms. A young man, who is full of cognitive passion and curiosity about the world, gets to know it through intuition, and not intellect. One can see here the influence of Bergson who claimed that real knowledge is not a matter of intellect but of intuition. For intuition allows one to comprehend reality without disfigurement. It seems therefore that for *Al-Qurmuti* the chief tool in the process of recognition is intuition. Cognition is here a magical act, the discovery of mysteries and the ability to convey this only to the chosen. The chosen one is "I", but the master of magic and the greatest sorceress is equally the mysterious lover: "You should wear a talisman on

¹³ Idem, *Shabah al-hisab*, op. cit., p. 49.

¹⁴ Idem, *A ma zilta ta'ihan, ayyuha al-musafir*, op. cit., p. 83.

¹⁵ Idem, *Shabah al-hisab*, op. cit., p. 50.

your breast. You are very susceptible to magic. You fall in love unaware that you are wandering through the desert of chastity. If you were my lover where are the traces of your sins? I looked in wonder straight into her eyes. The talisman I desire is a jewel hidden inside of me. I will have it one moonlit night, we will be unconsciously drunk. We have got lost somewhere on the road”¹⁶.

One often encounters on the adventurous journey one takes through Muhammad al-Qurmuti's short stories legendary or fabulous characters. Here there is Cinderella, the bird Rukhkh, and even Solomon. A catastrophic mood prevails however. Everything points to the fact that the world will shortly cease to exist: “I heard the last of the early morning news on the radio. It spoke about the approach of the end of the world: some scientist had discovered after many years of research and study into the history of peoples that the world was one day to end. He explained how the world like man has within itself self destructive forces”¹⁷. If we were to rely only upon visual impressions we would be unable to recreate the images presented. Al-Qurmuti has combined elements of movement, sound, colours, the range of light, shade and smell, in other words all those elements which act upon the various human senses. There arise in this way syncretic images which are composed of various elements. He makes use of the method of synesthesia or the transpositionality of some sensations to another¹⁸. This allows for aural and optical impressions to be combined together with those generated by smell and touch. It helps to create an impressionistic image evoking various subjective impressions in the reader. “Sitting in the hall that led onto the apron which was swarming with aircraft and waiting for the flight was extremely boring. Besides which it stank there of vomit and crude. Alluring announcements and adverts littered the walls the sort that it is sinful to seek”¹⁹. There dominates in the whole aesthetic tone of the short stories from the collection *Sa'at ar-rahil al-multahiba* abhorrence and disgust. Elements are here displayed which bring sensations of unpleasantness, disgust, sadness, nostalgia and the sense of life's absurdity. The texts of the short stories are filled with words and impressions connected with pain, suffering, deep depression and torment. The momentary inclusion of contrast is designed to increase the negative sensation within the reader, which comes about from the juxtaposition of two opposite things or concepts. It leads to confrontation between things that are important and noble and those that are trivial and comical. The inseparable accomplice of this grotesqueness is the presence, almost at every step, of distortion: “I saw in the court the judge, who looked as if he was the remnants of some species of dinosaur. Scorpions slithered into the chamber. The judge sat at a great bench, and his bushy eyebrows fell straight on her. He hit the octopus-shaped hammer making it clear that the case had started. After a moment the court crier calls the defence lawyer, an anonymous accused and absent witness. Quickly the

¹⁶ Idem, *Aza al-liqa' al-awwal*, op. cit., p. 12.

¹⁷ Idem, *Shabah al-hisab*, op. cit., p. 47.

¹⁸ *Słownik terminów literackich*, op. cit., p. 551.

¹⁹ Idem, *Sa'at ar-rahil al-multahiba*, op. cit., p. 87.

judge passes sentence: "As a result of the absence of the interested parties in this case I bequeath the proceedings to the Higher Chamber and to fate"²⁰.

Silence plays an extremely important role in the world of sleep, dreams, illusions and hallucinations. For man can see the most easily into his own soul when there is silence. To see where anxiety lurks. During silence man is seized by sorrow and yearning. The motif of wandering is derived from the yearning for something unknown. This is a motif that is typical for those creators in search of the aim and purpose of life. The wandering and the wanderer recall the passing of life, and such elements as dusk, empty expanses, fog, smoke, running water, a cemetery, a grave, an abyss, the moon or the wind are characteristic for their work. And finally, a detailed look at the Arab stem *r-h-l* says that besides a journey it also means a departure, a passing²¹.

The language of Muhammad al-Qurmuti's short stories is close to poetic language. Epic elements are reduced; there is discontinuity in the storyline. Poetic description dominates in the narrative which is enriched by numerous metaphors which aim to surprise, strike or enchant the reader. To constitute for him a demanding solution for the problem, to praise the unknown rationales as well as to create new notions the most common stylistic phenomenon amongst them being animism, as for example: "The planes liked to count the hours, but I can't stand it and the sea as well"²² or "I caught sight of a drop of water in the corner of the glass's lips. It was like a tear begging for forgiveness"²³. The language of Muhammad al-Qurmuti's short stories is sensual, vibrant with inner life and personal dynamism. In the short stories there often appear long sentences of complicated syntax, full of diverse figures of speech. All the techniques for artistic expression that are employed by the author, the stylistic means and figures of speech are designed to instil a sense of melancholy, sorrow and despondency within the reader, though also to awaken the reader to reach into the depths of his own being. They express the idea that human life is full of suffering and devoid of meaning. Philosophical monologues appear in the short stories e.g. those involving water, coffee, and a cigarette. Water is the personification of life. Coffee and the cigarette are things that give pleasure and help man in difficult moments. They tempt, presenting the evil world in which man has come to live in a rosy light.

Muhammad al-Qurmuti's pen works with precision extracting from the chaos of thoughts the most important elements of reality and laying them out with great care one next to the other. But the reader is not able to decode the sense of the text outright, although he is able to decipher each of the symbols separately. This is possible when he manages to cast off the controlling mechanism of understanding, break the barrier of being conditioned to everyday reality in order to enter into the realm of liberated imagination. Muhammad al-Qurmuti's ideal is a liberated man. He summons up the principles of human freedom through the help of specific means of expression. This

²⁰ Ibid., p. 89.

²¹ C.f. Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, New York 1976, 3rd edition, p. 331.

²² Muhammad al-Qurmuti, *A ma zilta ta'ihan, ayyuha al-musafir*, op. cit., p. 80.

²³ Idem, *Aza al-liqa' al-awwal*, op. cit., p. 6.

allows him to make a choice between good and evil, between order and chaos. He strives for something shocking and unusual. His short stories remind one to a certain degree of Salvadore Dali's pictures. Both are fascinated – revealing the most intimate “I” – with the phenomenon of paranoia, as well as an exhibitionist exploration of their own dreams, desires and obsessions. Their works can arouse not only admiration but also controversy. One thing is certain one cannot accuse them of not creating images which are deeply suggestive and which ingrain themselves in one's memory.

The most characteristic element in Al-Qurmuti's writing is the dazzling elevation in style. He shows in all his short stories superb linguistic versatility, unrestrained energy, poetic sensibility and a subtle choice in wording. His work ushered in a new order – or rather creative chaos heading in a new direction.