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**The Influence of the Sea on Bahrainis' Life.
Sea-Land Relation in the Poetry of 'Alī 'Abd Allāh Ḥalīfa**

Abstract

Looking at lives of Bahrainis living in the first half of the 20th century, we can often see a continuous journey of hard work between the dangerous waves of the sea as fishermen or pearl-divers, and the toil of cultivating the soil. 'Alī 'Abd Allāh Ḥalīfa who published works of poetry about the sea, seamen, pearl divers and their hard work, presents us a realistic view of Bahrain inhabitants' feelings towards the sea and their habitat.

To understand the sea and its influence on the Bahraini society, one has to understand the life of sailors and pearl divers working hard among its vast waters. Ḥalīfa wrote about this subject and even dedicated an entire collection of poems to it. Despite the fact that the poet wrote them after oil fields had been found, the situation in Bahrain improved and the job of pearl diver disappeared, the issue of working at sea was the main topic of his early works. By doing so, the poet wanted to indicate the problems unrelated to the new era of oil. For the pearl divers, the hard working conditions of poor workforce remained as harsh as they had used to be.

In the poems of 'Alī 'Abd Allāh Ḥalīfa we can see strong and complicated bond between man and sea which – while being a terrible monster – is also an object worthy of love. The source of such contradictory feelings of Bahrainis is possibly a specific location of their country. Willingly or not the people had to learn to coexist with the sea.

No doubt, the geographical location of Bahrain – a small island in the middle of the Persian Gulf – has given this land a specific character. Since the ancient times, the inhabitants of this diminutive country surrounded by waves have been aware that the sea figures very much in their lives. It was a source of food and a window on the world.

The distant world could bring not the good things only but also the evil ones, such as the danger of greed of monarchs aviding new conquests.

Feelings and fears of endangered homeland were deeply embedded into the consciousness of Bahraini authors. They were reflected in their works, inseparably bound with the theme of the sea and the relation between the sea and the land. Looking at the lives of the Bahrainis who lived before the first half of the 20th century, we can see that it is often a continuous journey of hard work between the dangerous waves of the sea as fishermen or pearl-divers, and the toil of cultivating the soil.

‘Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ḥalīfa, whose poetry depicted the sea, the seamen, the pearl divers and their hard work, presents us a realistic view of Bahrain inhabitants’ feelings towards the sea and the place they live in. In the poem *Ġiyāb* “Absence”, from the book *Fī wadā‘ as-sayyida al-ḥaḍrā’* (“On the Parting of the Green Lady”), a definite picture of sea – land is visible: during the low tide the rock emerges. This picture suggests the next: when water rises the rock sinks into the abyss. This scene demonstrates the power of the sea – during the high tide even the rock has to yield:

You leave the shore ashamed
and go into the waves.
The power of the waters shrinks,
Moreover, the rock admits the sea, that there is pride
and control in its high tide.¹

For the people living on the land, the sea is a monster capturing their loved ones who have to look for work amongst its waves. Most often, it devours those who work on its waters risking their lives in the search of mussels with pearls. There is little hope for their fortunate comeback. Such uncertainty badly impacts on children; their eyes always turned towards the sea whilst awaiting their fathers’ return. We can hear their echoing questions for the reason of persistent absence of fathers – yet no one will answer them. The work of sailors spending most of their lives far away from home deeply reflects on children’s psyche. The poet describes it showing the misery and worthlessness of the days away from the family. Children lack the feeling of security and self-esteem. The presence of father is essential to them and they cannot realise that his absence is caused by the necessity of providing for them. Craving for father’s return becomes a wish hard to get and his stay at home – a dream quickly going by:

You Father. O you our heart overflowed with emotion
You our days torn apart
why are you departing our house and leaving covertly?
Is it the distance taking you away?

¹ ‘Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ḥalīfa, *Fī wadā‘ as-sayyida al-ḥaḍrā’*, Dār Al-Ġadd, Al-Manāma 1992, p. 74.

The dream ebbs suddenly
And disappears the noise – silence in the space of the days.²

If we take a closer look at the last verse of this, we can spot that the expression “noise – silence”, the clash of antagonisms is a reflection of a child’s inner split, of contradictions they are torn between. They do not understand what runs their and their fathers’ lives. They feel that some external force controls their fate. In spite of the fathers’ promise of quick return, there is always something interfering with them keeping the promise. Hence every departure marks the beginning of a long and harsh period of time for children awaiting their fathers’ return. Only the fathers’ return can comfort their inner anxiety:

Who will let you leave the sea and return to us?
And your mounting absence
is still promising your home – coming.³

‘Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ḥalīfa presents the complicated world hidden in the soul of a child, trying to examine the depth of infantile fear, anxiety and concerns. It shows children who matured too soon, who were adults in spite of their age, and who can feel the responsibility burdening them. That is why we see their real efforts to support mothers during their fathers’ absence. It seems that the tough childhood of the poet, who lived in hunger and need in Bahrain before the oil-fields discovery, contributed to such perfect understanding of children’s experiences.

The poverty reflects on children’s faces. Lucky charms put on their chests by their mothers were supposed to protect the owner from evil express the mothers’ nervousness and their will to protect the children from misfortune during the hard times:

On the face of childhood
hardships of life and signs of darkness reflected on the left eyelid
The scar after incurable wound would persist
On the chest were hanging the broken charms
supposed to protect from evil eye and illness
He ran to me, in his look the bitterness and the rests of sleep
He said: I am as strong as ‘Antar,
couldn’t you take me with you to the sea...
I will do my best, all you order and even more?⁴

To prove that he is a man one can depend on during work at sea, the boy reminds his father that he knows many *Quran* suras by heart. The poet presents us some traditions

² Ibid., p. 75.

³ Ibid., p. 76.

⁴ ‘Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ḥalīfa, *Anīn aṣ-ṣawārī*, Dār Al-Ġadd, Al-Manāma 1994, III edition, pp. 60–61.

and superstitions of poor Bahrainis such as giving a piece of salt to lick to make a child prepared to memorize the suras:

I know two suras by heart today...
I memorized them,
for I eat salt every morning.⁵

For a pearl diver patience is a shelter from suffering. It is a partner for conversation. He asks it for granting his son a little good, so that he could live with dignity. It seems that son is not only an individual, but represents the whole generation of the nation deserving affluent life. Despite the poet declaring his Arabic nationality, he addresses to all the people of the world as brothers:

O patience, make my son live in dignity,
so that he could call [...]:
My brother! Man!
I suffer planting my heart with a palm,
to remain an Arab on this land⁶

In the poem *Qamar waḥīd li-zanābiq al-mā'* ("Lonely Moon for Water Lilies") we see a scene about sea – land relation. It seems a bit unclear, so we can interpret it in many ways. The first thought is of continuous struggle of land and sea, the basis of which is the fear of the land being flooded by the sea, and the fear of the sea of land's enlargement and independence. The poet writes about an island, which becomes a playground for the birds. The gathering of birds flying over the sea – out of the land – symbolizes life, independence and freedom out of any bounds:

Does this ingratitude that
had touched the depth of a hike
welcomed the islands to meet
and created a land for the gathering birds?⁷

To understand the sea and its influence on Bahraini society, one has to get to know the life of sailors and pearl divers working hard among its unlimited waters. 'Alī 'Abd Allāh Ḥalīfa wrote about this subject and even devoted it a whole book of poems. Vast majority of Bahrainis were occupied with pearl diving. The dream of the poor was to find a big precious pearl, which would solve all their problems – paying off debts and bringing improvement to their lives. Despite the fact that the poet wrote when oil

⁵ Ibid., p. 61.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 64–65.

⁷ 'Alī 'Abd Allāh Ḥalīfa, *Ḥurriyyat al-'āṣiq*, Al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya li-ad-Dirāsāt wa-an-Naṣr, Bayrūt 2000, pp. 8–9.

fields had already been found, the situation in Bahrain improved and the job of pearl diver disappeared, the issue of working at sea was the main topic of his earlier works. The poet wanted to indicate the problems seemingly not connected with the new era of oil, but the hard working conditions of poor workforce were as harsh as they used to be for pearl divers.

‘Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ḥalīfa took up the subject of working at sea realistically, and as ‘Alawī al-Hāšimī writes: “The realistic creative experiment of ‘Alī was not limited to investigating one aspect – pearl diving, although it was the main subject and was shown thoroughly and meticulously. This experiment also treated about farming, showing life and suffering of a farmer. It is interesting and it draws attention that the poet joins these two aspects and examines them as if they were two sides of the same creative experiment.”⁸

Pearl divers’ attitude toward the sea is very specific and full of contradictions. The treacherous sea can destroy the boat, tear the sail and devour the sailor’s body. The endless fight between the seamen, and the storms and huge waves continues. ‘Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ḥalīfa, writing about divers and sailors depicts them as the poor risking their lives to feed their numerous family. Their poor condition – debts and large families – makes them overwork with no possibility of returning empty-handed. Bitter memories of long sea travels are borne in mind. They become the subject of stories told to warn the young sailors who set off on the sea for the first time. In the poem ‘*Alā abwāb ar-riḥla al-ūla*’ (“At the Gates of the First Travel”), the old, experienced sailor is trying to comfort the boy who is going to sail for the first time. He is the son of the old man’s friend taken by the sea. Cautioning him, the man talks about the dangers that lurk among the waves:

Do not cry!
 Never agree to be as weak as a woman among men!
 Son, death is inevitable!
 Everyone passes away when God wants
 My little, this is our reality, no escape from that!
 We have to pay our debts;
 we have to take the new ones out for bread...
 To live, keep to the seas searching for pearls like hundreds of men
 They sealed their souls with endurance
 and belittled the bitter misery of all life⁹

Awareness of danger, the need for persistent vigilance and concentration are needed from the first moment on board. Among the waves and storms, people are helpless and driven by blind fate. Their food is rotten dates, to quench their thirst they drink dirty water kept in old, rusted containers:

⁸ ‘Alawī al-Hāšimī, *As-Sukūn al-mutaḥarrik – al-ḡuz’ at-tālīḥ: bunyat al-maḍmūn*, Manšūrāt Ittīḥād Kuttāb wa-Uḍabā’ al-Imārāt, Aš-Šāriqa 1995, p. 179.

⁹ ‘Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ḥalīfa, *Anīm...*, op. cit, pp. 25–27.

Beware of the sea!

First, you experience seasickness, attacking like a violent storm.

And the drinking water in the old, battered container
is similar to the vomit of a sick stomach.

Our meals are miserable dates, a joyful fare for worms¹⁰

Hunger grasps all divers, but does not stop them from taking risk:

In silent, gloomy seas giving fright,

the only meal is bread and all suffer from hunger¹¹

Harsh and severe life of seamen requires great strength, patience and determination. Moreover, the sea, like an unruly, stubborn giant does not accept the weak and frightened amidst its kingdom. The reader can hear this in the words of an old experienced sailor teaching a boy:

Be tough and patient... don't be afraid

Be like of steel,

because the one you are moving towards is a stubborn giant.

When the oars will fall on the waves with great force

our sails will flap high on the masts...

O sail weaved from the thread of patience of my suffering chest!¹²

The traces of ceaseless fights with the ocean are visible not only on the faces and on hands of men, but also inside their souls. In the poem, *Anīn aṣ-ṣawārī* ("The Cries of Masts") the poet emphasises the incredible stamina, courage and heroism of people experiencing danger and fright during work:

I see men, whose hands are eaten by salt and wounded by ropes.

After this hard day, the night comes with pale stars.

The silence falls,

among which you can hear only coughing, moans and prayers.

I spend the night thinking and see nothing but illusions,

they frighten the heart and want to deprive from endurance¹³

Actually, people of many professions take part in a pearl diving operation: captain commanding the ship, pearl divers, deckhand serving all the men on the boat and learning

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 33.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 30.

¹² Ibid., p. 29.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 54–55.

the job of pearl diving. The boy, whilst learning, listens carefully to the experienced seamen's stories:

Son of the poor, be obedient to everyone,
A nice deckhand eager to run from port to starboard,
Preparing and giving narghile to the captain,
and rolled cigarettes to the divers...¹⁴

In the poem *Anīn aṣ-ṣawārī*, the poet incorporates diver's memories. When he was a young boy, working as a deckhand, he was torn between his ambition to become an experienced diver, and his mother's tears and fear caused by the probability of his death. He felt anxiety then, realising he could die any moment, but he was responsible for sustaining the family. Many times he asked himself a question if he could face such a challenge. This picture has dwelled in his memory and heart for many years. When in his old age he recollects:

How much the heart cried from fright,
when sailing into the sea as a little deckhand!
Mother walked me with tears in her eyes
and gave me many warnings
Father asked God for my growing into man.
I carry a weight seeking precious pearls in the depths...¹⁵

In the antagonistic relation of man and sea in spite of distrust, there is some amiability, even love from the sailor. Fear of unlimited sea and its treachery will not stop men from expressing warm feelings towards it:

And after these long years of diving,
I fell in love with the sea
I could feel the bond between us
and lost yearning for the land.
Yes by love too big
I forgot about my children whilst sailing for long years¹⁶

In the poems of Ḥalīfa we can see strong and complicated bond between man and sea which while being terrible monster is also an object worthy of love. The source of such contradictory feelings of Bahrainis is possibly a specific location of their country. The people willingly or not had to learn to coexist with the sea.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 30–31.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 53–54.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 55–56.

In his poetry, 'Alī 'Abd Allāh Ḥa l ī f a expertly pictured significant meaning of the sea in lives of his fellow men. In a realistic though artistic way, he had shown the hard situation of all torn between land and sea; men leaving families eagerly awaiting their comeback, and hoping for a better life.