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The Beginnings of Prose Writing in Bahrain

Abstract

The contemporary rebirth of literary cultural life in Bahrain began only with the start of the twentieth century. An important role in the development of contemporary Bahraini literature has been played by the press. Its development is linked with the name ‘Abd Allāh az-Zā’id who, in the period 1939–1944, published the weekly “Ġarīdat al-Baḥrayn”. The first socio-cultural journal was “Ṣawt al-Baḥrayn”. The creation of literary clubs and the development of the press directly influenced the flowering of cultural-literary life in Bahrain by creating conditions in which writers, poets and intellectuals could be published. Their works presented a vast array of viewpoints and positions reflecting the changes underway in the country. The output of ‘Alī Sayyār, Muḥammad al-Māğid and Ḥalaf Aḥmad Ḥalaf constitutes their own form of literary document. They introduced a new means of viewing the world and new ways of expression.

The contemporary rebirth of literary cultural life in Bahrain began only with the start of the twentieth century. At the head of these Bahraini restorers of Arabic and literary tradition stood Sheikh Ibrāhīm Ibn Muḥammad Āl Ḥalīfa (1850–1933) a poet, writer and bibliophile.¹ He undertook in his works an examination of social questions, in a way similar to Amīn ar-Riḥānī and ‘Abd Allāh aṭ-Ṭā’ī. The meetings of Bahraini intellectuals that took place at his home constituted a discussion forum for poetical and literary matters. Sheikh Ibrāhīm Āl Ḥalīfa possessed an enormous library. He brought Arabic books from India, subscribed to religious and socio-cultural magazines, as well as maintaining contact with many eminent minds of the day including Amīn

¹ Dr. Muḥammad Ġābir al-Anṣārī, *Al-Mağmū’a al-kāmila li-aṭār Ṣayḥ Ibrāhīm Ibn Muḥammad Āl Ḥalīfa*, Bahrain 1968, Dr. Makkī Muḥammad Sarḥān, *Aṣ-Ṣā’ir al-kabīr Ibrāhīm Ibn Muḥammad Āl Ḥalīfa*, Bahrain 1993,

ar-Riḥānī, ‘Abd al-Azīz ar-Rašīd and Ibrāhīm al-Yāzīǧī. As has been noted by the poet and eminent literary critic Dr. ‘Alawī al-Ḥāšimī: “Sheikh Ibrāhīm Ibn Muḥammad Āl Ḥalīfa belonged to those pioneers responsible for the renaissance of contemporary poetry in Bahrain”.² At present his work is being continued by Sheikh Mayy Āl Ḥalīfa the director of the Sheikh Ibrāhīm Ibn Muḥammad Āl Ḥalīfa Centre. The centre has its own library, publishes literary materials in the “Iṣrāqāt” series, as well as organizing lectures and literary evenings and meetings.

Thanks to the efforts of the known thinker and poet Salmān at-Tāǧir the National Public Library was founded in Al-Manāma in 1913. Shortly afterwards the *Nādī Iqbal Club* was established, with the first Literary Club, *An-Nādī al-Adabī*, appearing in 1920. This Literary Club was founded in Al-Muḥarraq thanks to the significant support of the Bahraini dean for culture and literature – Sheikh Muḥammad Ibn ‘Isā Āl Ḥalīfa. Later other clubs came into being which propagated cultural-literary activities, including *Nādī al-Baḥrayn* (1937), *Nādī an-Naḥḍa* (1946) and others.³ The Club *Nādī al-‘Urūba*, founded in 1939, organized from the moment of its inception dozens of lectures and literary-cultural meetings. From the very beginning the most eminent thinkers and men of letters met there. The Club produces the journal “Al-‘Urūba”.⁴

An important literary event was the founding, in 1969 in Al-Manāma, of the Union of Bahraini Writers – *Usrat al-Udaba’ wa-al-Kuttāb* whose foundation was largely down to the activities of eminent Bahraini poets and thinkers like: Dr. Muḥammad Ġābir al-Anṣārī, Dr. ‘Alawī al-Ḥāšimī, Dr. Ibrāhīm al-Ġulūm, ‘Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ḥalīfa, Qāsim Ḥaddād, Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Malik, Ḥalaf Aḥmad Ḥalaf, Ya‘qūb Muḥarraḡī, Ḥamda Ḥamīs, Yūsuf Ḥasan, Ġāfar Ḥasan and others. The Union was to support the development of the intellectual and literary movement in Bahrain, support young literary talents, develop cooperation between artists, as well as to organize national and international literary meetings. In 1983 the journal “Kalimāt” started to be published. Here were published the poetic and prose works of contemporary writers along side literary sketches.

In 1986 the National Council for Culture, the Arts and Literature was called into being (*Al-Maǧlis al-Waṭanī li-at-Taḡāfa wa-al-Funūn wa-al-Ādāb*), its aim being the support of the development of artistic creative life in Bahrain, the support of the creators of culture, the organization of artistic exhibitions and cultural festivals, as well as cooperation with other cultural centres abroad. Since 1994 the Council has published the journal “Al-Baḥrayn at-Taḡāfī”.⁵ The National Cultural Forum (*Al-Multaḡā at-Taḡāfī al-Ahlī*), founded in 1995, has been from its very inception an important element in the literary and national life of Bahrain. The National Cultural Forum regularly organizes poetry meetings and lectures on

² Dr. ‘Alawī al-Ḥāšimī, *Šu‘arā’ al-Baḥrayn al-mu‘āširūn*, Bahrain 1988, p. 17.

³ ‘Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ḥalīfa, *Al-Mu‘assasāt at-taḡāfiyya*, in: *At-Taḡāfa fī al-Baḥrayn fī talāḡa ‘uqūd*, Bahrain 1993, p. 200.

⁴ Taḡī Muḥammad al-Baḥārīna, *Nādī al-‘Urūba. Sittūna ‘āman fī ḥidmat at-taḡāfa wa-al-muḡtama’*, Bahrain 1999.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 201–210.

literary criticism. ‘Abd ar-Raḥman Ğāsim K ā n ū deserves especial note for his services to this cultural institution, supported by the well-known modern poet ‘Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ḥ al ī f a. The National Cultural Forum, through the organizing of literary workshops, cultural festivals and the publication of the most interesting literary works, attempts to promote the achievements of young creative talent from Bahrain and abroad.

An important role in the development of contemporary Bahraini literature has been played by the press. Its development is linked with the name ‘Abd Allāh a z - Z ā ’ i d who, in the period 1939–1944, published the weekly “Ġarīdat al-Baḥrayn”. The first socio-cultural journal was “Ṣawt al-Baḥrayn” which was published from 1950 to 1955. The cultural-literary weekly “Al-Ḥamīla” (1952–1956) appeared side by side with newspapers of a political character like “Al-Qāfila” (1952–1954) or “Al-Waṭan” (1955–1956). The newspaper “Ġarīdat al-Aḍwā” started to be published in 1956. In the period 1976–1985 there appeared in the literary arena the quarterly “Kitābāt” which had been founded by ‘Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ḥ al ī f a. This journal published innovative articles and literary works that propagated the rebirth of Bahraini literature.

The creation of literary clubs and the development of the press directly influenced the flowering of cultural-literary life in Bahrain by creating conditions in which writers, poets and intellectuals could be published. Their works presented a vast array of viewpoints and positions reflecting the changes underway in the country.

One of the pioneers of short stories is ‘Alī S a y y ā r, born in 1926 in Bahrain. Years of studies in Cairo, numerous journeys and longer stays in Kuwait, the Arab Emirates, Qatar, Syria, and Lebanon, provided him with enormous literary material for short stories. In 1976 he published his first collection of short stories, entitled *As-Sayyid* (“The Master”). The subject matter of the stories revolves around power, greed for money, and authority of a father dominating in a family. The writer insists on limiting the father’s power and demands more freedom in deciding about an entity’s individual needs. The title *As-Sayyid* decides about his 10-year-old son Muḥammad’s fate in a way that is incomprehensible for the boy: “On Saturday my father entered the house. It was late. He said to my mother in a strange cold voice: Today everything must change”.⁶

Despite the fact that the boy did not understand the meaning of those words: “I saw the father for the last time... I did not understand my mother’s tears, and why I left the home where I had lived and where I had been born. The home that was a little kingdom... I understood it only after years had passed... This was when I understood the meaning of an odious thing whose name is divorce...”⁷

The situation of the mother and the boy changed. Both were forced to work to earn their living. The boy found a job at a ‘new Master’s’ (*As-Sayyid al-ġadīd*). He was supposed to transport something to Lebanon, something he did not see. He got a thousand liras for each transport. He was grateful for the master for hiring him to do the job. After some time, his life changed. He took pleasure in all sorts of entertainment including wine and women: “I started to look at life from the perspective of money. From

⁶ ‘Alī S a y y ā r, *As-Sayyid*, in: *As-Sayyid*, Bahrain 1976, p. 66.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

the perspective of pleasures...”⁸ He bought his mother a house, willing to recompense her for all those years of pain and suffering: “She asked about this mysterious wealth that I had acquired. I did not answer. I only laughed and calmed her saying I had found a decent job”.⁹ Eventually, this job led him to prison. The title *As-Sayyīd* is a reference to the new master whose name was money.

The protagonist of a story, entitled *Fī yadī ḡamāḡim* (“There are Skulls in my Hand”), becomes lost because of his desire to rule life. He was locked up in a mental hospital after he ran into the street with a skull in his hand. The reason for this was his mother’s death which he, as a doctor, could not have prevented: “My mother died in my hands... Her hand dropped on my arm. A drop of blood appeared on my shirt”.¹⁰ The man is woeful and feels guilty that after studying in England he let the person he loved so much die. His fulfilled dream of becoming a doctor, because “a doctor carries the keys of power on earth”,¹¹ fell into ruin. His desire to decide about the fates of others’ did not come true.

Ambition was also the motivation for characters in the story *Al-Ma‘raka* (“The Battle”). Like previous works, this story is of a retrospective character. Abu Muhammad claims that Abū Su‘ād is a liar. Both men were ship captains. They dealt in pearl fishing, which was a common activity in Bahrain. They rivalled with one another trying to fish the biggest pearl possible. Abū Muḥammad wants to beat Abū Su‘ād at any price. The action takes place on the sea where their ships meet. Their goal is to fish out this one biggest pearl. Meanwhile, the weather gets worse, which causes Abū Su‘ād to withdraw from the competition. Abū Muḥammad, filled with greed for victory, does not care about his and his crew’s fate and wants to fish out the pearl regardless: “Death opens its mouth with every leap of a wild wave... The ship sinks. The torn sail flaps in the air... Mountains of waves surround the ship... One of them leaps on the deck. The men struggle with the waves. They commence a battle for their lives...”¹²

Finally, Abū Su‘ād’s ship reaches the shore. A black flag flaps on the mast. Those who survived fight with fear. Abū Muḥammad also survived, but this event drove him insane. For the next thirty years, till his death, he claims Abū Su‘ād is a liar since it is he who is the biggest pearl fisher.

‘Alī S a y y ā r sees power not only in ambition and money, but also in corruption and hypocrisy. The protagonist of the story *Sa’aṭruduka yā ‘Abd as-Salām* (“I Will Throw You Out, ‘Abd as-Salām”) is a high-ranking civil servant on whose decisions a lot depends: “On my desk there lies a piece of paper on which I signed my name. It is not the only one. There are more than a hundred of them. Each of them has a different name on it.

⁸ Ibid., p. 80.

⁹ Ibid., p. 79.

¹⁰ ‘Alī S a y y ā r, *Fī yadī ḡamāḡim*, op. cit., p. 62.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 54.

¹² ‘Alī S a y y ā r, *Al-Ma‘raka*, op. cit., p. 17.

I signed my name on all of them. I left only one piece of paper without my signature. I put it aside so that it would not get mixed up with the others".¹³

It was documents of 'Abd as-Salam's, a friend of this civil servant, who did not sign his old friend's leave: "Eight years ago, I and 'Abd as-Salam were colleagues attending the same school. He was good at mathematics, and I at geography. We were more than just colleagues; we were friends. His life was a part of my life. My interests were a part of his interests".¹⁴

The writer values friendship but opposes settling things because of connections. This is reflected in his other works, e.g. in *Hikayāt 'ašarat danānīr* ("A Tale of Ten Dinars") in which a civil servant is visited by a petitioner with a bribe. When the civil servant asks him who had suggested this idea, he hears that it was his friend Yūsuf from the ministry. It turned out that this important Yusuf obtained his position by handing out bribes. Nevertheless, the servant does not accept the bribe. "...Ten dinars in my hand. I could do nothing... but look at those ten dinars and throw them into the bin. My lips say to the man standing in front of me: I am subordinate to Yusuf. Please take your place in the queue".¹⁵

The author draws attention to the fact that often inappropriate people occupy administrative offices only because of connections or bribes. 'Alī Sayyār criticizes bribery, superfluous ambition and hypocrisy. In the story *Mā'zaq* ("Dilemma") we meet civil servants again. Each of them is false, envious, and willing to gossip about their colleagues.¹⁶ There are few who want to be honest in their occupations, which is the desire of the protagonist of a story, entitled *As-Salālim* ("Stairs"): "On the stairs of this ministry, more than two months ago there was a piece of paper in my hand with a request for a job. Any job. Even if this meant being a porter. I had finished secondary school".¹⁷

The man visited the office every ten days. He was going to and fro on the title stairs and each time he was sent away empty-handed. He said to himself: "Look, what is the value of being a human in society. I want to live. I just want to live. I do not want a marble palace, or a luxurious car. I do not want a beautiful wife. I just want to live. Sometimes it seems to me that animals are luckier than I am. They may find something to eat. And me, a human... where can I find something to eat?"¹⁸

For this young man a job meant humanity. Inability to find a job meant humiliation. When he finally found a job he shouted: "I have become a human!"¹⁹

In his works 'Alī Sayyār expresses his regret that it is hard for honest people to find their place in the modern world. A greed for money and power destroys the joy

¹³ 'Alī Sayyār, *Sa'aṭruduka yā 'Abd as-Salām*, op. cit., p. 26.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁵ 'Alī Sayyār, *Hikayāt 'ašarat danānīr*, op. cit., p. 25.

¹⁶ 'Alī Sayyār, *Mā'zaq*, op. cit., p. 94.

¹⁷ 'Alī Sayyār, *As-Salālim*, op. cit., p. 44.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 47–48.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 52.

and beauty of life. In his short stories he also included a critique of men who do not identify themselves with the reality they live in. The fact that he omits moralizing tones makes his stories approachable. They make people sensitive and open their minds to the aspects of reality they have not noticed before. They will not become invalid despite social development and historical changes.

Muḥammad al-Māğīd's work breaks free of the scheme of the difficult and hermetic. His short stories are written in a simple language and the images presented attempt to arouse reflection on contemporary man. In the first short story from the collection published in 1970 in Kuwait, entitled *Maqāṭi' min sīmfūniyya ḥazīna* ("Fragments of a Sorrowful Symphony"), he presents us with reflections on the subject of day and night. One can clearly see that day values itself the more, because: "In the day one can forget who one is",²⁰ while at night one fears: "the next day died, and the next night begins!... Darkness approaches. Every time I sense it like a spear thrust deep into the depth of my heart".²¹ The hero is presented as a part of the whole, experiencing those same desires of freedom. The language and style of the short story is worthy of attention. Here the hero conducts conversations with an internal derisive voice:

"– How long can you hold out, ha, ha
– Haven't I told you to be quiet?!... I drained the glass".²²

In observing the room full of drunken people various thoughts come to his mind: "Are you able to discover what happens behind their laughter?".²³

The author employs in the short story many dots in order to realize the natural pauses in thought. The exclamations *ah*, *ha* that appear are often used in daily conversations.

The subject of darkness is continued in the short story *Al-'Ālam yamūt fī muḥriq* ("The World is Dying in Fire"). Darkness brings forth strange thoughts and a lack of activity intensifies it: "I will die this night, if boredom and emptiness die".²⁴ The hero is taken by a deep depression, he talks to himself: "My grandma is better than I am a million times. At least she believes in something. And I... What do I believe in? Emptiness? Death? Defeat?... I have only known this in life".²⁵

For people like him there is no future in the country. They have been deprived of the possibilities of a normal life and work. The first part is written chaotically, there are a mass of rhetorical questions. In the second the hero gives voice to his feelings to a woman over the telephone who turns out to be a prostitute.

We can find various faces of sorrow and depression in the volume *Maqāṭi' min sīmfūniyya ḥazīna*. In the short story *Ṣadāqa 'ağība* ("A Strange Friendship") the hero

²⁰ Muḥammad al-Māğīd, *Buka' šamt fī layl ṭawīl*, in: *Maqāṭi' min sīmfūniyya ḥazīna*, Kuwait 1970, p. 3.

²¹ Ibid., p. 3.

²² Ibid., p. 6.

²³ Ibid., p. 6.

²⁴ Muḥammad al-Māğīd, *Al-'Ālam yamūt fī muḥriq*, op. cit., p. 31.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 32.

realizes the truth about himself, that he and more than likely his internal 'I' are different people, behaving differently when in private and reacting differently to the exterior and that the true value of life is to be found in he himself: "You and I, we are different, Friend! We should understand this. I have so much to tell you".²⁶ In his evaluation only two things count in life: love and friendship.

A yearning for a free homeland runs through the short story *Li-man yuḡannī al-qamar?* ("For Whom Does the Moon Sing?") which the hero defines as "the search for light in the dark".²⁷ In another short story *Al-Ġaḥīm* ("The Hellish Fire") a lack of faith in his own strengths pushes the hero to abandon his surroundings. The short story shocks with the pessimism of the first sentences: "If everything disappeared then it would be a triumph and success... If the whole world and everyone in it drowned in an abyss it would be a great victory".²⁸

With time the tone of the short story calms down as if under the influence of a woman's recollections, a woman the hero loves although he cannot be with her. They have a rather different idea of happiness. According to him: "happiness is when a man does not feel alone in this world".²⁹ While she claims: "It is enough that a man thinks he's happy".³⁰ Participating in the wedding of his beloved to another man he experiences pure agony: "Maybe there will be an earthquake and this world will be destroyed before I give her my hand... Maybe everything will stop and I will die before I give her my hand..."³¹

All allusions relate to the motherland which poets and writers have many times identified with a woman. The author expresses hope that one day his country will be free for its citizens and not bound to an occupying power. The hero feels sorrow and is depressed when talking to his beloved: "I created a poem. But it was not written in blue ink, but in the blood of crimes and darkness".³²

In this short story there is no room for happiness and hope. The hero falls into depression. He does not see any future for himself or any aim in life. His feelings are expressed by the words: "I haven't found anything in my life... Sorrow I meet at every step and I will continue to meet it. Always..."³³

In the last short story that brings to an end this symphony of sorrow there appears a certain medicine: "Raise your glasses! Hide yourself in them for ever! For this is the one asylum from the sorrows of the world".³⁴

But is alcohol able to muffle the questions whirling in his head? The hero engages in discussion with a friend on the subject of the meaning of such a life where there is a lack of hope for a better tomorrow. He himself admits to defeat with the words: "Someone

²⁶ Muḥammad al-Māḡīd, *Ṣadāqa 'aḡība*, op. cit., p. 74.

²⁷ Muḥammad al-Māḡīd, *Li-man yuḡannī al-qamar?*, op. cit., p. 59.

²⁸ Muḥammad al-Māḡīd, *Al-Ġaḥīm*, op. cit., p. 13.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 15.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 15.

³¹ Ibid., p. 17.

³² Ibid., p. 22.

³³ Ibid., p. 19.

³⁴ Muḥammad al-Māḡīd, *Aṣḍa' al-faḡr'a*, op. cit., p. 89.

else better than me will be able to put the sparkle back into her eyes!”³⁵ With these very words Muḥammad al-Māğīd finishes his short story and the whole volume. His short stories are a reflection of the views and dilemmas of a generation, a valuable and interesting document. There is an absence in them of principles and over sensitivity, but there is a vein of hope without which it would be difficult for man to live.

Joseph Conrad claimed that art is the great ear and a great eye of the world; in listening and seeing one is able to feel shame, irritate and awaken one's conscience. It is just such creativity that characterizes the work of Ḥalaf Aḥmad Ḥalaf. Of especial note is his second collection of short stories, entitled *Fīzinār* (“Viznar”)³⁶ in which, on the one hand, he takes us into the world of intimate experiences, while on the other he reflects the difficulties of Arabs associated with the political situation in the Arab world. The collection opens with a short story, entitled *Ḥawāriğ az-zamān al-ātī* (“In the Direction of Approaching Time”), in which against the setting of a desert landscape the writer sketches the characters of a father and a son who exist on the border of life and death for the son Madi was born in secret and therefore all the time must spend in hiding: “Madi looked around in all directions. He calmed down on seeing no one on the horizon. He disappeared into the tent to waken his sleeping son Muqbal and to take him out for the daily custom of observing the setting sun”.³⁷

The author, in a long monologue by the father, ensures for himself the possibility of reflecting on the subject of the political situation in the Arab world: “We lived here amidst the dunes... we had homes – I don't know if you understand what I mean – what a house is that is not a tent.. These memories torment me. They took away power from us and it was not then animals that covered this land and did not carry on their backs our profits. How proud we were! Do you know what pride is Muqbal? Do you know what the gleam of gold is and what it can do? News of our good fortune became known in all the corners of the world. And when a foreigner passed by our headquarters we would invite him in and would serve him wine from our groves. Our bravery weakened, our laws disappeared, and we started to act strangely and small mindedly not like our fore fathers. In the end we became models of stupidity and fodder for dullards who dared to defile our most holy places... We were overcome with sorrow and the whole splendor faded. They occupied our strongest capitals and they became the most docile of capitals. We forgot the codes and law to fight for the remains, we mistook friend for foe. And when they started to destroy our most beautiful city we hid... and it became the most submissive city. We allowed for everything, as weak-willed as the grass we were plucked from our roots, buried in a sand storm. We forgot with every attack about the previous one. Our memory forgot names and dates... We are dispersed, on the border of extinction, as other nations have died out before us. You ask me if one of us lives

³⁵ Ibid., p. 96.

³⁶ The place where the poet Federico Garcia Lorca was executed, shot by Falange militia on August 19, 1936 and thrown into an unmarked grave in or around between Viznar and Alfacar, near Granada, as explained by Ḥalaf Aḥmad Ḥalaf himself.

³⁷ Ḥalaf Aḥmad Ḥalaf, *Ḥawāriğ az-zamān al-ātī*, in: *Fīzinār*, Beirut/Bahrain 1985, p. 6.

somewhere in cities? Of course, kingdoms derive from us..., which in every matter turn to their occupiers for help".³⁸

This sentimental tale of unity, prosperity and the bright past of the Arabs contrasts with the present situation, deriding human dignity, the life situation of two lonely Bedouins – portrayed almost as the last representatives of a dying breed. The monologue clearly points to those who are guilty for this state of affairs. On the one hand a lack of foresight, a loss of strong will, the degradation of the Arabs themselves, while on the other hand the willingly utilization of this state of affairs by the colonial powers. The writer, through the mouthpiece of Made, condemns the submissiveness of the Arabs and is unable to come to terms with the loss of unity and the loss of Jerusalem: "And when they started to destroy our most beautiful city we hid... and it became the most submissive city". Blameworthy, for the writer, are the leaders of the Arab world, the self-proclaimed authorities sponsored by Western governments. This very fact represents the greatest obstacle for a return to Arab unity (*al-waḥda al-'arabiyya*). The story ends however with a certain note of optimism for Muqbal is a character who does not accept passive waiting. He wants to act and helped by a character similar to himself from the literary world of Ḡhassān K a n a f ā n ī, who inspires Ḥalaf Aḥmad Ḥ a l a f, he sets off in the direction of the new generation and times devoid of opportunism and servility.

The short story *Al-Waqt* ("Time") is a display of unusual literary inventiveness. Its subject matter is the passing of time and death, yet portrayed in an unconventional way, constructing an unusual conception of death and through this of life itself. We are dealing here with personified characters of time. The writer shows us his own key to one of the aspects of human life which belongs to the time of the title. Time is subordinated to physical changes. It clearly speaks of dividing and scattering its particles, and also transforming into a drop of sweat. The next stage of the transformation that proves the manifestation of this dimension of our reality is that time: "again falls into sleepiness".³⁹

The closing of the works with descriptions of scenes occurring just after the death of the main heroes is a certain creative concept. This is what happens in this case. Sin, ecstasy, a sense of guilt and the role of time all finally link together.

One of the shortest of the short stories is *Qirā'a fī al-waraqa al-qadīma* ("A Drawing from Childhood"). It deals with the very personal experiences of a child and its developing consciousness, which is the writer's regression to childhood and the feelings associated with it. The writer tells of the misunderstanding experienced by small children on the part of those closest to them by means of the example of a short episode in drawing. The work is on the one hand reflections upon childhood sensitivity, while on the other it shows the way children perceive reality which is not understood by adults.

Problems of motherhood, preparing for it, the desire to become a mother as well as strict social norms of behavior are dealt with by the short story *Al-Maw'ūda* ("Buried Alive"). On the one hand it is a surprising subject for a man to take up, on the other hand the writer is a psychology and philosophy graduate. Ḥalaf Aḥmad Ḥ a l a f attempts

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 9–10.

³⁹ Ḥalaf Aḥmad Ḥ a l a f, *Al-Waqt*, op. cit., pp. 12–15.

to go deeply into the consciousness of a young girl who is transforming into a woman. The first period makes her sensitive to her body and its changing shape. She starts to think about herself as about a perceived mature person, falling into the embarrassing gazes of men. And finally she experiences pride in being a woman. And here the Islamic norms of morality in relation to women step in. The heroine's mother, a representative of an older generation, knowing what a girl of her age knows and should do, tells her as a warning a story about her peer Maryam who was murdered by her father as a result of an ordinary law that demands the death of a girl in a case whereby she becomes pregnant outside of marriage. Here there occurs a dramatic description of the severing of the head by means of a sickle during work in the fields: "The father came, grabbed her by the hair and pulled her back. He touched the delicate girl's neck with the blade of the sickle. Initially she heard the cutting of the grasses growing in the weak damp soil, and then the blow, dealt neither hard nor soft. And the next armfuls of grass ripped from the brown earth fell similar to balls. The father carelessly cast her there where the rest was piled up. The head hit against many others and her eyes looked at the figure of her father with blind submission. The drops of blood did not separate from any of the stalks after they were severed. The girl was gripped by a desire to shout: Father, but I'm a palm! But her mouth filled with earth. Her consciousness registered the beginning of the last impressions, the last moments on earth and the first in the other world... noise... and the muffled crying of her mother moving off into the distance".⁴⁰

From this cruel moment the writer combines in one the story of the adolescent girl desiring to derive from the fertility growing within her and the murdered Maryam. The palm – the alter ego of everyone desiring the state of motherhood – fulfils an unusually momentous role and is the symbol of fertility.

Ḥalaf Aḥmad Ḥalaf is actively engaged in theatrical and journalist activities. In his works he depicts people who are not suited to life, unable to fight, passively subjecting themselves to their fate. His artistic sensitivity and poetic impressionism are the most lasting aspects of his creativity.

⁴⁰ Ḥalaf Aḥmad Ḥalaf, *Al-Maw'ūda*, op. cit., pp. 39–40,