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**Dark and bright sides of man's life in Muḥammad al-Murr's
short stories**

Muḥammad al-Murr, a contemporary writer of the United Arab Emirates, was born in Dubayy, in 1954, where he grew up and completed the Secondary School. In the seventies he left for the United States where he studied at the Syracuse University, New York. His sojourn abroad played an important part in shaping his philosophy of life and it greatly affected his gift for literature. On his return to the Emirates in the early eighties, he started working for a regional paper as a journalist. This activity marks an initial period of his literary career. He had been editing his column entitled *Awraq al-aḥad* (Sunday Papers) at the newspaper called "Al-Ḥaliġ". He wrote about cultural and social issues. He cooperated with the "Al-Bayān" magazine, where he edited *Ḥadīṭ al-iṭṭayn* (Monday Chats). Muḥammad al-Murr made his début in the columns of the "Al-Bayān" in 1982 with his first short story entitled *Ḥubb min naw' aḥar* (Love of Different Kind). His first collection of short stories under the identical title was released in the same year.¹

Apart from the literary work, which has been his priority since Muḥammad al-Murr started writing, he has been chairing the Cultural Academic Forum in Dubayy. Yet first and foremost, he is an esteemed representative of the literary world.

As he emphasizes himself, short stories are both his passion and a favourite genre in writing.² They brought him recognition of his talent both

¹ Muḥammad al-Murr, *Min taġāribihim* (Of Their Ordeals), "Maġallat al-Fayṣal" 207, Ar-Riyāq 1994.

² Muḥammad al-Murr wrote the following collections of short stories: *Ḥubb min naw' aḥar* (Love of a Different Kind)—1982, *Al-Furṣa al-aḥira* (The Last Chance)—1983, *Ṣadāqa* (Friendship)—1984, *Al-Mufaġa'a* (The Surprise)—1985, *Yāsmīn* (Jessamine)—1986, *Naṣīb* (Destiny)—1986, *Ḥabbūba* (Ḥabbūba)—1987, *Makān fi al-qalb* (The Place in Your Heart)—1988, *Qurrat al-'ayn* (A Pleasure for Your Eye)—1988, *Aṣ-Ṣawt an-na'im* (A Soft Voice)—1989, *Siḥāba ṣayf* (A Summer Cloud)—1995, *Fayaḍān qalb* (A Flood of the Heart)—2000.

in his national circle and among European literary critics since their first appearance in 1982.

In 1985 Muḥammad al-Murr published one of the most interesting collections of his short stories entitled *Šay' min al-ḥanān* (Little Love and Compassion) in which the author pursues his literary fascination for this short epic form. It is an ideal device for him, the eulogist of his present times, to introduce his remarks on the Arab community, its modern life, problems and menaces in the United Arab Emirates.

In his works he argues the majority of Emirate writers comprehend the present as the social, political and economic transformations occurring in towns which determines the character of the best part of his literary production. The content of the collection reveals writer's preferences for characteristic features inherent in realism, which, obviously, adds up to the picture of his output. It is realism that marks the reputation of this modern Emirate writer among his contemporaries.

Short stories from his collection *Šay' min al-ḥanān* can be certainly included among realist works depicting author's scepticism in the face of his world problems. One cannot find any trace of grotesque and the fantastic there. The author chooses the simplest possible form for his message and accomplishes it on all planes as he believes that capacity for telling the truth is indispensable to those ones who intend to gradually transform the face of the modern times.

Realism seems to corroborate author's belief the surrounding field of his observation does not differ significantly from the problems of other people who belong to different communities. However, there are some typical features of Arab mentality and customs native to inhabitants of Arabia.

For the above mentioned reasons, it is worth presenting the thematic content of the short stories included in the quoted collection. Firstly, to value it, secondly, to emphasize that the modern Arab literature is developing and is, to some extent, similar to other literatures. Furthermore, it can be instructive and enlightening for an European, too.

The writer's discriminating glance embraces various social groups. He scrutinizes both people of his society circle (the literati) and the others, representing those classes which cannot be ignored, otherwise one might be accused of being subjective.

The Lower Classes

Characters representing the lower classes, very often, if not always, appear in his stories. They are the poorest, discriminated against and suffering from extreme poverty and humiliation of different kinds. Muḥammad al-Murr also explores reasons that lead to such hardship; needless to say, he usually draws conclusions about fates imprinted in human vicissitudes. He associates an individual's harm with indifference showed towards the poorest by the powerful people who refuse their help.

Such miserable heroes oft-times are of vital importance for the meaning of the whole work, to give the example of short stories such as *Ṣāliḥ* (Ṣāliḥ), *Aḥwāl 'Abbūd kātīm aṣ-ṣawt* (Situations 'Abbūd-Voice Muffling) and *Al-Bībsī* (Pepsi).

The title hero of the first work already mentioned is permanently tied up with his social circle and his inferiority is always emphasized and remembered by the rich of his world (the Ḥalaf family); they always remember that his grandfather is a pearl diver, the profession of the poor with the lowest income, and they always remind him about his homelessness and life led in a mud hut given to him as an act of mercy by his wealthy neighbour. Nevertheless, the picture of his life Ṣāliḥ is not exclusively dark. It is entirely different from his ancestors' existence and Muḥammad al-Murr brings this contrast to light. Life of the people of the lowest pedigree is no longer stigmatized so univocally by tragedy (in this case it is inevitable, though, but due to different reasons).

The writer notices and highlights the fact that the youth coming from the poor regions can improve their life. They are offered a chance of growth and education that will help them overcome social barriers. Ṣāliḥ—a pearl diver's grandson and porter's son who was brought up in a mud hut and resigned himself to his social discrimination studies management at the Cairo University, a course which is useful and popular not only with the Arab youth. His occupation makes another example of how young generation tends to follow other cultural patterns of the modern times.

The other short stories carry much more tragedy; heroes who represent a working class are unemployed, exploited, doomed to stagnancy and forced to lead unfruitful and hopeless life. Al-Murr always remembers that these problems are still present in his world, so one cannot avoid showing them if a picture being created is to be a true reflection of the reality.

There are some poignant portraits presented; 'Abbūd—an unemployed, who is even deprived of the least but absolutely untransferable property

which is a human will. The other moving character is Farḥān—a forty-year-old black man, a lame, who lost everything after an accident at a drilling platform and who had to exist in miserable conditions relying on social welfare.

In both cases the author's reflection upon life arouses sympathy.

His keen observation sheds light on crucial problem of wrong being done to ethnic minorities; a phenomenon connected directly with the Arab world. These social groups are exploited in the business of extraction of the "black gold" which eventually becomes man's curse. In addition to this, Al-Murr delineates the fact of the widespread exploitation based on the utmost unfair advantage of the individual who, as it is in Farḥān's case, suffers from cruel treatment. As a result of his accident he became dependant of the State. This social welfare consisted in an allowance paid every three months. In moments of crisis, the afflicted hero cannot control his grief addressing it to the whole world. He keeps remembering his better past, the social post he held before the accident and eats his heart out as he was denied damages which were promised to him. Both short stories end sadly, particularly the last one. Nothing changes in people's lives, they continue to drag out their wretched existence deprived of the welfare and their fellows' help. Eventually, all the social problems included in the plot remain unsolved and the heroes' lives appear to bear permanent social stigma.

The following short story entitled—*Mā yuqāl wa-mā lā yuqāl* (Things That Are Said and Things That Are Left Untold) seeks to give not only a synopsis of social issues but presents progress achieved in comparison to the past.

A hero's presence, who is a poet Ḥālid, serves as an example of some successful effort being made to move up a social ladder that results in overcoming poverty through education. He is able to talk about the past of his family without any embarrassment showing that he is familiar with indigence, even gets used to it and finds it obvious. According to him, human beings are blessed by the economic development and cultural advancement which bring the poorest some improvement of their life; they do not die of unhygienic lifestyle or because they are not provided with healthcare. The episodes in which the hero relates to his past are the most horrifying of the whole collection. They engender a moral and aesthetic shock followed by stupefaction at such barbarous conditions of the human existence:

There were no toilets in the houses. Each cluster of buildings had its litter pile, a dwelling place for packs of stray and dirty dogs. Not only was my mother delousing my brothers' and sisters' heads but she did the same with their garments cov-

ered with colonies of louses. What cleanliness, my Lord! One of our neighbours took a bath once a three months.³

The reader is provided with some consolation, though. The depicted situations relate to the past and the presence is portrayed with less gloomy colours. However, this short story is one of the most sceptical of the collection; the author does not see any reasons for beautifying the past. He knows how to display the truth in spite of the fact that it presents his community as a crude one.

Young People—a Hope of the Society?

Young people are protagonists of the majority of the short stories included in the analysed collection of works. Their lifestyle and manners are portrayed in a way that abounds with a great deal of interesting issues of both sociological and ethical character. The author proclaims himself decidedly in favour of the youth. He notices their strength and is proud of the fact that young people do not close themselves in the realm of the Arabic past and tradition and are capable of taking advantage of the development of the modern world if they find it useful in their life. It is them—according to the author—who are going to transform the face of the reality.

Vicissitudes of the representatives of many classes, always belonging to the young generation, reflect crucial phenomena of the modern times, both positive and negative ones. Similarly to other social groups, study on their culture leads to significant conclusions about the contemporary civilisation; its uniform tendencies and a tradition inherent in the cultural circle being depicted.

A student community is portrayed, among others, in a short story entitled *Aṣ-Ṣaf'a* (A Slap in the Face), with Dubayy and Cairo as a scenery for its plot. The two main characters are Laylā who studies sociology, and Ğāsim, a student of economy.

A social gap that separates protagonists and eventually shatters their love and plans of living together does not limit their possibilities in the academic field—there are no contradictions here between expectations and reality. They are given the same opportunities for growth resulting in

³ Muḥammad al-Murr, *Mā yuqāl wa-mā lā yuqāl*, [in:] *Al-A'māl al-qiṣaṣiyya*, vol. I, Bayrūxt 1992, p. 377. All quotations of Al-Murr's works come from this edition.

acquiring some interesting profession and a career that would reflect their new position in the world.

The writer uses their story to show how different social pedigree thwarts young people in being happy together. It was the man, who decided to break their relationship. He proved to be immature as he was not able to contradict his mother and did not know how to overcome social conventions.

There are not many words being said about contemporary students' lives, nevertheless, one can find out about their organization which looks after their problems and defends their national identity. In their spare time they play tennis and all activities of their lives are arranged according to a strict sex separation (in connection with the Arab tradition).

The next short story entitled *Al- 'Ağab wa-as-sabab* (The Astonishment and the Reason) develops a theme of the youth's life. Not only does it present the two protagonists Badriyya and Fayṣal with their interests and lifestyles but it also portrays many other characters of secondary importance from the same class. Anonymous students introduced to the story, do not bring anything significant to the main plot. On the other hand, they help to universalize the ideas of students' reality in the United Arab Emirates.

Each of them is gifted differently and they have distinct interests indicating both their social disposition and personalities, not to mention their social status. The individuals being portrayed demonstrate the variety of characters among young people, show their potential, a world wisdom and the extensive knowledge of history, politics and culture. It distinguishes them explicitly from their society. Moreover, they are perceived as the future leaders of their country providing their nation with entirely different perspectives. All in all, the narrator depicts diversity of passions of the young people who go deeply into Buddhism, modern, architecture and etc.:

There was some Sālim Ḥamīs. An intelligent and sensible boy who could speak Buddhism profusely, the *'udrī* poetry (the Beduin love poetry) and the sun power. He was also able to explain why Al-Ma'mūn fought Al-Amīn and he gave the reason why Trocki was defeated by Stalin. His talks on magnificent architecture styles all over the world, Italian films on the New Realism and American jazz were fluent and smooth.⁴

By presenting open-mindedness of his young characters the writer aims at obtaining certain goals. Firstly, to show their eagerness to learn about

⁴ Muḥammad al-Murr, *Al- 'Ağab wa-as-sabab*, op. cit., pp. 325, 326.

other cultures and civilizations of the world, secondly, to emphasize that their national tradition becomes a subject of deep studies. They are not perfect individuals as it is revealed in the main plot of the story which is an interesting ethical riddle. They are not meant to be ideal, though. This feature is one of the strong points of Muḥammad al-Murr's writing skills that makes him a realist writer worthy the name. His heroes are important in themselves as a kind of mirrors that reflect social transformations in progress and not because they are perfect students. In fact, they manifest a growing desire for being well-educated supported by their strong belief that education may change their existence and bring respect and financial independence.

Another good example of this approach might be the next protagonist, Sālīm Dollar (*Dūlār wa-rūbiya*—Dollar and rupee)—a civil servant at cabinet—minister level. He achieved this post through extensive education. His academic path and its character speaks volumes for the ways the Arab youth, gifted and ambitious, strives for their education:

Sālīm is an educated man. He studied electrical engineering in England and graduated with distinction through his total devotion to his studies which made him not integrate with other students and the English society.⁵

Obviously, this description contains the model attitude, promoted by the author and evaluated positively by him, which consists of attachment to hero's community, sticking to his identity and national tradition and finally, using the acquired knowledge and skills for the benefit of his country. It is worth noticing that a picture of the young generation is not complete. The writer pointed out dignity of his own community through shedding light on the class of the studying youth. He presents their horizons, attitudes towards their own tradition and modern times. One can feel very well the air of pride because of that fact; education appears to be a direct road towards the improvement of one's fate. Although there are many manifestations of social inequality, a chance of the social rise and finding acceptance emerges through education.

On the other hand, there are not any protagonists who despite their wishes and talents, do not obtain their longed-for professions. It seems to be the author's conscious choice to point out some positive stimuli that would encourage one to pursue existing possibilities. Young people, who are aware of their own worth, open to the changes occurring world wide but

⁵ Muḥammad al-Murr, *Dūlār wa-rūbiya*, op. cit., p. 309.

at the same time following their national tradition, could be a harbinger of development for the Arab society, resulting hopefully in the establishment of an array of close relations with other nations much more advanced in education.

Women—Refugees from the World of the Men or their Equal Partners?

Appearing social issues and their detailed analysis could not ignore a picture of women in the modern world. In the majority of short stories of the analysed collection *Šay' min al-ḥanān*, it is women that play an influential part in the plot as protagonists or characters of secondary importance. A life of a woman, her social status and development occurring in the modern times provides the author with excellent opportunity to present a gravity of the social problems while female protagonists with their individualized fates add to making the picture of his contemporary world total.

Muḥammad al-Murr's ideas on woman's significance and her social standing in the Islamic world, where the fair sex is badly discriminated against, are included in the following works: *Hiğrat al-Muḥannaṭ* (Al-Muḥannaṭ's Immigration), *Al-Qarār al-ḥaṭīr* (An Important Decision), *Imtilā' al-yad al-fāriġa* (Filling the Open Hand), *Kalimāt, kalimāt, kalimāt* (Words, Words, Words), *Mā yuqāl wa-mā lā yuqāl, Dūlār wa-rūbiya* or a title short story: *Šay' min al-ḥanān*.

Degradation and discrimination weave in this world although there are some examples of changes being introduced; women struggle to obtain new status through a social rise on the grounds of their transformed awareness, where there is place for self-appreciation, dignity, human worth and confidence in their potential.

A short story entitled *Mā yuqāl wa-mā lā yuqāl*, embraces all these issues bringing some characteristic comparison and summary. Ḥālīd, who evaluates his present times from the stand point of the man who knows the past and is fully aware of the transformations occurring. It is particularly interesting that he finds the present situation of the woman much worse in comparison to the past and is fully convinced that civilizing achievements and progress, which has modernized a great deal of fields of life, have not improved women's plight. They are exposed to men's contempt, they are dependant on them and lack their acceptance (*Kalimāt, kalimāt, kalimāt* and a title short story: *Šay' min al-ḥanān*). Taking everything in consideration Ḥālīd, the protagonist, states laconically and openly that a position of

the woman in the modern times is bad.⁶

A marginalization of women, debarring them from crucial decision making produces an illusion that they do not exist at all, while hidden in the shelter of their houses they truly live. This situation is expressed metaphorically by a protagonist in a short story entitled *Hiğrat al-Muğannağ*, he says:

There are men and women in all countries of the world except for ours. There are men everywhere and only men here. I happen to think sometimes that women in our country are a minority, like Negroes in the United States or the Hindu people in Ceylon. I am sometimes tormented by nightmares and see Dubayy becoming the city for the men solely. A place where there are not mothers, sisters, and wives nor little girls playing. The local women put themselves out of sight, and those who appear look, in fact, as if they were hiding themselves.⁷

Muğammad al-Murr—a realist writer. He would be taken this name away if he had not portrayed any contemporary women who accept themselves and claim acceptance from the others (the men, in the first place). Such protagonists appear in *Al-Qarār al-ħağır*, *Imtilā' al-yad al-fāriğā*, *Dulār wa-rūbiya*. They seek to follow new, world standards in their lives and are not afraid of self-dependence. Well-educated and self-confident, the modern Arab women are ready to defend their autonomy at all costs.

The problem arises whether their new endeavour can bring them happiness and self-realization, as there are not female characters in Muğammad al-Murr's short stories that would be entirely successful in their pursuit of personal fulfilment. While it is true to say that they seem to pay a high price for their new status, in fact there is also some tragedy imprinted in their fates.

The other side of the coin is that those emancipated women very often manifest their attachment to traditional clothing which links them with the whole world of the Islamic culture. Furthermore, it distinguishes their identity from other women all over the world.

On the whole, the themes and problems presented by Muğammad Al-Murr in his prose writing reveal the truth of man, his nature, inclinations and ability to adapt to the world or to fight for the right case. The artistry of his realist style and a thematic range of his works make him worth of reader's attention.

⁶ Muğammad al-Murr, *Mā yuqāl wa-mā lā yuqāl*, op. cit., p. 378.

⁷ Muğammad al-Murr, *Hiğrat Al-Muğannağ*, op. cit., p. 385.