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**Thoughts on the Poetry of the Contemporary Bahraini Poet
'Alī 'Abd Allāh Ḥalīfa**

'Alī 'Abd Allāh Ḥalīfa is one of the most eminent of contemporary poets in Bahrain. This small Gulf state has become the homeland for many excellent poets including Ṭarafa Ibn al-'Abd—the author of the longest *mu'allāqa* in pre-Islamic poetry. Other names worthy of note are Al-Mutalammis and Al-Muraqqaš al-Aṣṣḡar¹.

'Alī 'Abd Allāh Ḥalīfa published his first poetic attempts in the mid 1960s in the literary journal "Al-Aḏwā". Later these works were collected and published in the volume of poetry *Anīn aṣ-ṣawārī* (The Sighing of the Masts) in 1969. This collection was devoted to the subject of the sea, fishermen, pearl divers and their daily work. Two volumes of poetry: *'Aṭaš an-naḥīl* (The Palms' Thirst) and *'Aṣāfir al-masā'* (Evening Birds), published in 1970 and 1983 respectively, are written in dialect, which was a conscious choice on the part of the poet to make the work more accessible to the average reader. In the volume *'Aṭaš an-naḥīl* 'Alī 'Abd Allāh Ḥalīfa developed his poetical talent. In each of the poems in the collection the characteristic structure of the *mawāliyyā*² harmonises with the contents. The majority of them are composed of seven lines (*musabba'*), e.g. the poems

¹ Maṣūr Muḥammad Sarḥān, *Wāqī' al-ḥaraka al-fikriyya fī Al-Baḥrayn 1940-1990*, Al-Manāma 1993, pp. 16-17.

² *Mawāliyyā* (*mawāliyyā*) one of "Seven Arts" (*al-funūn al-sab'a*) i.e. forms of verse composition which include the classical ode (*qaṣīda*) but also the later multi-rhyme inventions. The first reliable examples belong to the seventh/thirteenth century. Early poems consist of four lines in the *basīṭ* metre with a single rhyme what is called *rubā'ī* or *murabba'*. Later developments are the result of additions between the third and fourth lines. At present the *mawāliyyā* is more commonly called *mawwāl* (pl. *mawāwīl*), the term previously applied to the composer of *mawāliyyā*. cf. *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*. Edited by Julie Scott Meisami & Paul Starkey, Routledge, London & New York, 1998, vol. 2, pp. 518-519.

Yā layt or *Al-Ayyām*³. The first three lines have an identical rhyme AAA, the subsequent three have the rhyme BBB, while the last one rhymes again with A (AAA BBB A). The remaining *mawāwīl* preserve a nine-line rhyme structure AAAA BBBB A, for instance the verse entitled *Sayf al-qahr*⁴. Usually, the first three or four lines depending upon the type of *mawāliyā* (seven- or nine-line) has the rhyme placed on a homophone used however in its various meanings.⁵ Despite the fact that ‘Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ḥalīfa was proclaimed a poet of *mawāwīl*, he has tried to free himself from its characteristic structure. In one of his interviews he states: ‘I have tried to completely free myself from the traditional, inflexible form of the *mawāliyā* turning to modern verse full of space’.⁶

The volume entitled ‘*Aṣāfir al-masā*’ (Evening Birds) is proof that the poet has shown himself in other poetical forms. It contains chiefly love poems. To a part of which music has been written and they are sung.

Besides which ‘Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ḥalīfa has published two volumes written in the arabic literary language: *Iḍā’a li-dākirat al-waṭan* (The Clearing of the Memory of the Homeland) in 1973 and *Fī wadā’ as-sayyida al-ḥaḍrā’* (On the Parting of the Green Lady) in 1992. In the course of his poetical activities ‘Alī constantly worked upon his artistic method and developed his talent so that in his last volume *Fī wadā’ as-sayyida al-ḥaḍrā’* (On the Parting of the Green Lady) he achieves genuine poetic mastery. One can see in it full creative maturity together with a deep understanding of the world and its ways. Ḥalīfa, just like his great forebears (e.g. Al-Mutanabbī), complains about the bad, cruel times he has to live in. Reality for him is a prison, even for birds, which he expresses in the poem *Ṣahad ar-ramād* (Ash):

“This cruel time
Is the time in whose shadow flowers die
And the birds are prisoners in its expanse”⁷

The poet has already placed his reflections in his earlier poems, e.g. *Baḍr al-arāḍī al-wāhibā* (The Seeds of the Abundant Earth) from the collection *Anīn aṣ-ṣawārī* (The Sighing of the Masts):

³ ‘Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ḥalīfa, ‘*Aṭaṣ an-naḥīl*, Al-Manāma 1994, IVth editon, p. 41.

⁴ Ibid., p. 75.

⁵ Ibid., p. 71.

⁶ ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Maḥādīn, *Ma’a aṣ-ṣā’ir ‘Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ḥalīfa*, in: “*Aṭ-Ṭaqāfa al-‘Arabiyya*” no. 7, July 1975, pp. 62-66.

⁷ ‘Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ḥalīfa, *Fī wadā’ as-sayyida al-ḥaḍrā’*, Al-Manāma 1992, p. 11.

“Oh, you treacherous time
Stealing people’s nourishment...”⁸

In the poem *As-Sanābil* (Ears) the poet directly refers to this ‘bad time’ where there is no room for good and honest people. The poem is reflective, it contains an aura of silent accusation and revolt, as well as helplessness in the face of the repeating schematic situations of life. However, despite the existing cruelty and hypocrisy in human existence, honesty and truth remain the highest goal for ‘Alī:

“In this bad time
If you come with good
And dew the withered rose with your blood
And oppose with truth
The ugly deceitful face of life.
Then the company will leave you
And those near will desert you
And ignoramuses will cast stones at you in the street
On all sides frogs will surround you
You will become the prisoner of rumour.”⁹

The earth was not basically inclined for the subtlety of its knights, except possibly in rare moments of generosity, of a miracle or of some superhuman practice. The honour of seeing, looking, loneliness remains. Being a clown does not achieve the support of the author. The final lines of the same poem bring the truth of the possible charisma of change and the necessity of the protection of truth by man:

“In this bad time
Maybe help
Is only being a clown in this disdainful game
However man should protect the truth
And from a running wound the ear of corn grows.”¹⁰

In the poem *Ṣahd ar-ramād* (Ash) the poet feels disenchanted with life and isolated when there is no one to talk to, hence he asks:

⁸ ‘Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ḥalīfa, *Anīn aṣ-ṣawārī*, Al-Manāma 1994, III editon, p. 67.

⁹ ‘Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ḥalīfa, *Fī wadā’ as-sayyida al-ḥaḍrā*, p. 98.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 100.

“Who heartens the disenchantment of a soul?
Oh you great disenchantment.”¹¹

In the work *An-Nahl wa-aṭrāf an-nahr an-nāḍib* (Palms and the Ends of the Dried Up River) we read:

“Did you try the taste of loneliness when
The birds pecked memories...?
My, how wild is that bird of prey!!”¹²

In his isolation the poet feels shattered, defeated and exhausted. He expresses this in the poem *Sayyida al-qalb* (Lady of the Heart):

“I am exhausted
Shattered in this world
Defeated and alone.”¹³

In the article by Bāsim ‘Abd Al-Ḥamīd Ḥammūdī we read that poetry for ‘Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ḥalīfa is ‘the foundation full of life satiated with turbulent emotions and the base of destiny being the fire in his blood (...) It is the messenger for all aspects of life.’¹⁴

Also Ḥalīfa himself explains, through his poem entitled *Ṭā’ir an-nār* (The Fiery Bird), what poetry is to him:

“Poetry is my disenchantment and victory
And it, oh if you had seen Layla, my madness and suicide
Poetry is the fiery bird singing in my blood
And the water flower of watery colour in my withering and bloom.”¹⁵

In the poem entitled *Ṭā’ir an-nār* (The Fiery Bird) there is poetry which is a true witness of his life. It is poetry that mobilises him to follow the course of thoughts and the soul. This sincere labour will never disappear as

¹¹ Ibid., p. 14.

¹² Ibid., p. 42.

¹³ Ibid., p. 60.

¹⁴ Bāsim ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Ḥammūdī, *Waqfa ma’a dīwān Fī wadā’ as-sayyida al-ḥaḍrā’ li-š-šā’ir ‘Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ḥalīfa*, in: “Al-Baḥrayn at-Taḳāfiyya” no. 16, April 1998, pp. 36-40.

¹⁵ ‘Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ḥalīfa, *Fī wadā’ as-sayyida al-ḥaḍrā’*, p. 84.

long as there is a hand able to raise a pen, and breath to penetrate silence. Though after all this is in accordance with the characteristic Arabic poetic soul, in the life of which poetry is always like the loyal horse slightly outstripping the rider. Thanks to which real madness and suicide no longer have a clear road, it is fettered by art, its appointments and pledges of mission. The poem from start to finish plays itself out in lofty areas, amidst the peaks common for God, man, human fate and the enigma of mission. At the same time the poem is directed to a second person, the actual and symbolic Laylā. It is directed to her listening and loving soul. We are dealing here therefore with the hidden sense that 'all is poetry'. The author's soul experiences all of which in an unlimited way. Love also is certain, but the author is not steered by love, but through an internally elusive quality, where love must be doubly initiated: by oneself and learning. So the mysterious final words of the poem would indicate:

"Therefore accept the pieces of heart and stand...
To the beautiful seclusion
The time of union has come to pass."¹⁶

The fiancée invites the reader to the world of the intercourse of the soul and to her communion with pieces of heart. Layla must become independent poetry before it can combine with the author and they can act within the world of poetry.

The poem *Fī wadā' as-sayyida al-haḍrā'* (On the Parting of the Green Lady) touches on the sad subject of the decline of civilisation. This decline is connected with the over exploitation and lack of conscious maintenance of the natural environment, its essence personified here by the female nature of the Green Lady. The Green Lady, treated with disdainful majesty, starts to be respected when her absence starts to be perceived. For up to that moment she had fulfilled a subservient function:

"You were a house servant, the refuge of the emaciated
And the mother of the wretched."¹⁷

The author asks a rhetorical question wondering what will be left when nature ceases to exist:

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 72.

“What is possible, oh, my Green Lady
When life passes, leaving its green colour.”¹⁸

This line has a very loose form. The subsequent lines freely compile the semantic fields. The Green Lady is the root, the Lady amongst the trees, the head high in the clouds. As unappreciated she is greeted by the rivers, the seas and the heavenly bodies.

The poem entitled *Anā an tahǧa‘ al-ḥayl* (The Time Came to Rest the Horses) speaks of effort, intuition, love and achievement. The first part of the poem can relate to the happy arrival at a place where matters can be explained, consoled, can liberate love in the raptures of the spirit. It can equally be related to a purely love situation, as equally spiritual - the search for the presence of God. Everything is possible and a thousand doors can answer a thousand yearnings and a thousand questions. The second part of the verse can refer either to the author or the hero encouraged to take a rest on life’s journey, to the luxury of safety earned. However if one is to look closer it can equally be a polemic with God himself—with he who having lit the wick of suffering in man lost the countenance of his face amongst people. He does not ask why that happens though one may suppose that the spiritual reality did not turn out to be as permanent as we supposed. The poet says:

“Submit to your time, for time
Is bringing you to the end.”¹⁹

With this, however, one can and should polemicize—what time is coming to an end? And this refers to the end lines relating to the horse, which for certain are here a metaphor and symbol of intuition, and of the living course.

In these hostile realities for the poet the light of hope almost extinguishes, only a small spark remains and does not allow itself to be smothered. The poet writes in the poem *Mustawḥiṣ* (The Wild Man):

“I am wild
I was seized by a fear of darkness
The heart despite trying did not reach the light
The light which almost extinguished... in the distance.”²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 49.

²⁰ Ibid., p.107,

Dreams bring, however, hope which becomes reality also in the poem entitled *Tağū‘ al-ḥurra‘* (When the Independent Woman Starves) we can see optimistic elements:

“There on the horizon the star is still twinkling
Smile
The palms still have their place
In the stories told by people.”²¹

In seeking salvation the poet comes to the conclusion that only love is able to change everything. When the face of the beloved woman takes on the features of festivity, life changes its taste becoming soulful and full of the beauty that the poem *Fī ḥaḍrat man ahwā* (In the Presence of the One I Love) reflects:

“When your heart shone with the face of the prophet
The taste of lavishment changed in a bitter time.”²²

The poet with a great sense of tact deals with different problems connected with the difficult side of existence: death, darkness, hunger, weariness as one can see in the first half of the poem entitled *Baḍr al-arāḍī al-wāhiba* (The Seeds of the Abundant Earth). However this mood does not dominate the whole poem. The author expresses here many optimistic opinions about a child who is able to suffer, about the morning star which accompanies man throughout the whole of his life, the courage of people who with a smile welcome their days and tasks. The remaining part of the poem consisting of a few segments is elegiac in character. The dominating sadness and lyricism of a throbbing heart characterises in turns the tragic life situation of the boy and again the direct requests addressed to the sea to take him away. The boy complains about the lack of interest in his person. Everybody is so engrossed in worry, and dawn has not reached the distant corner. The time is described as treacherous, not drawing attention to human affairs and even more hope for a purposeful experience of life full of beauty. Despite this, that which flows out of the boy's soul is poetic, great, protecting the human dignity of dreadful and unwanted suffering:

²¹ Ibid., p.110,

²² Ibid., p.119,

“I am emaciated... I am emaciated
 To the point of death.
 Oh you who planted various plants in the soil
 I am emaciated
 I am life... I equal life.”²³

The poem entitled ‘*Aynī ‘alā naymat zuhr* (Looking at the Southern Star) does not constitute such compact thought compositions as the others, but the four time repeated expression ‘little bird sing poetry’ links the whole. The sight of the poet slides gently over the areas of human existence. Reflection on life is impartial. The main and meaningful thing is always fire:

“And he who has fire inside
 Is not afraid of glowing coal in his palm.”²⁴

The beautiful *mawāliyā Al-Ayyām* (Days) describes the dignity and entourage of love. The person in love and rejected does not destroy his love. He immerses himself in oblivion, hides on the ocean bed where renewal can not reach him, screams with a justified scream like a child plucked from the breast. The right of love is always dominating.

“Oh you loved one, who poured salt onto the wound
 I gave you my heart and you tortured my soul
 I have no hope for your love, your wings beat, go away
 My heart will not be offended, it is in the depths of the sea
 Forgets about the pain of the night... it’s like a baby
 That screams after having been plucked for ever from the breast
 There is nothing like time to heal the wounds.”²⁵

The poem *Wayn aštirī lak dawā?* (Where will I buy You Medicine?) is a kind of a polemic with a son. In ‘Alī’s poetry the thought range often refers to such a parallel. The contents of this piece is clear. Everybody has on their own to define themselves, recognise and win. In this poem it is expressed as a symbolic medicine.

²³ ‘Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ḥalīfa, *Anīn aṣ-ṣawārī*, p. 71,

²⁴ ‘Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ḥalīfa, *‘Aṭaš an-naḥīl*, Al-Manāma 1994, IVth editon, p.75.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 17.

“Where will I buy you medicine, nobody sells for nothing
 Around the land where desire can not be satisfied
 There is no happiness for a man with stable feelings, only for a
 scoundrel
 Where can I buy medicine for you, everybody has there own affairs
 The palms have died, son, the earth is thirsty
 And the wounds of my years have opened
 Make your own medicine for your wounds, there is no free medicine.”²⁶

The *mawāliyā* entitled *Yā layt* (Yearning) is the poet’s poetic picture describing the dissociation of body and soul, wholeness and part, cleanliness and reality, good and evil. The echoes of the polemic with the collectively reach us. The poet does not want to agree to generalisations. Life is alive. He is offended when somebody claims that it is sweet and flowery. Sweetness is desire and a wounded flower is existence. ‘Alī fully accepts the turns of faith. He underlines the energy and greatness of life, life of the soul wanting to kiss the sun in every house. In every house there lives poetry, and only such a true book of life is worthy of being written and read.

“They said: your drink is honey! I said: it’s the desire of the soul.
 They said: your youth is a flower! I said: the flower is wounded.
 They said: its a shame that the moon retires after being full.
 Oh, if only the moon didn’t disappear in the morning
 Look, I’m flying, after a while I fall broken.
 I want to kiss the sun in every house.
 But where is the one who would give the soul back to the body?”

‘Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ḥalīfa’s poetry is subtle. If one does not follow every word, no matter whether it fulfils the reader’s expectation or not, its refined expression eludes, eludes the delicate artistic matter of the thought, which takes place in time, blossoms or ordinarily shows its intention.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 41.