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Sa'ida Bint Ḥāṭir al-Fārisī—the water of ice and fire

The beginnings of Omani women's literary work go back to the previous century, when the Sultan of Oman and Zanzibar's daughter Sayyida Sālma Bint Sa'īd started to write her memoirs, which were published in Berlin in 1886 under the title *Muḍakkirāt Amīra 'Arabiyya (Memoirs of an Arabian Princess)*. In her book she described her life story; youth, marriage to a foreigner, departure from the country and the great longing accompanying her. She also pictured the discrepancy between the societies of the East, where she was born and spend her childhood, and the West, where she was to spend the rest of her life.

The beginnings of modern literary activity amongst women in Oman can be placed in the 1980s. That is, within the period of the great development of literary culture. The nineties are a time of eruption in literary activity both in the field of poetry and prose.

The names of many poets, such as: Sa'ida Bint Ḥāṭir al-Fārisī, Turkiyya al-Būsa'idī, Hāšimiyya al-Mūsawī, Nūrā al-Bādī, Samīra al-Ḥarūšī, Nisrīn al-Būsa'idī and Badriyya al-Wahaybī have become well known. Their works seem to be understood by readers both from the East and from the West, as their leading universal themes of love or patriotism are an inspiration for all cultures. Their poetry is dominated by modern compositions in terms of form as well as content, however some of the poets attempt to be faithful to the Arabic poetic tradition (Sa'ida Bint Ḥāṭir al-Fārisī, Hāšimiyya al-Mūsawī).

Each reader may understand the poems presented in a different way, as everybody reacts to them according to their own feelings and interpretational capability. The interpretation presented here is in a way selective and subjective, however it is my wish for it to help the reader in acknowledging certain motifs and symbols which are here characteristic.

In general, it can be said, that the thematic scope of Omani women works encompasses the entire richness of life in all its facets, and the poets

and writers with the passion of neophytes discover its secret. As can be deduced on the basis of the works produced so far, Omani women have not said their final word, both in poetry and in prose. Through work and increased experience their writing has a great chance to become increasingly interesting and to develop richly.

Sa'ida Bint Ḥāṭir al-Fārisī deserves to be particularly singled out amongst women poets. She was born in 1956. She graduated in Arabic at the University of Kuwait, gaining a diploma in Arabic and teaching. At present she is working on her PhD which concerns women's poetry in the Persian Gulf. She travels extensively in Arab countries.

Sa'ida Bint Ḥāṭir writes extensively and publishes widely in newspapers and journals as well as actively participating in cultural festivals and symposia. She often represents Oman at international events. This is how she herself comments upon her intellectual development: "We Omanis lived for a long time abroad. We started to return home only when Sultan Qābūs ascended to power. Earlier the difficult conditions of life, together with the absence of educational possibilities, forced our family to leave for Kuwait. When we left under the previous regime we were unable to return as the law of the time forbade women and girls to leave the country. When Sultan Qābūs opened the borders for us we returned. The first works I started to write were panegyrics devoted to the beloved homeland. We have all helped to build it. I became the editor-in-chief of the women's journal "Umāniyya" (Omani Woman), vice dean for student affairs and the chairwoman of the cultural commission in An-Nādī at-Ṭaqāfī. I have organised six cultural festivals. Besides children's poetry, which I love, I write national anthems, articles about the folklore of the environs of Salāla, Nizwa, Ṣūr and Masqaṭ"¹.

She has published two volumes of poetry: the first, published in 1986 in Egypt, was entitled *Madd fī baḥr al-a'māq* (*The Tide in the Heart of the Sea*), and the second, *Uḡniyyāt li-ṭ-ṭufūla wa-āl-ḥuḍra* (*Songs for Childhood and Greenery*) was published in 1988 in Muscat. The latter contains verse for children. It is divided into three parts to correlate with the age of the recipients. Part one for children from the age of 6 to 8. Part two from 9 to 12, and part three from 13 to 16. The poems vary in terms of level depending on the age group. Her first volume of poetry, which is devoted

¹ On the basis of an interview carried out by Barbara Michalak-Pikulska with Sa'ida Bint Ḥāṭir in Masqaṭ on 13th March, 2001.

to national and Arab subject matter, deals with a range of social problems and matters of custom.

The motif of love runs through the whole of Sa'ida Bint Ḥāṭir's poetry—not only passionate love, but also the powerful love felt for the fatherland.

The poem entitled *Qabla an tarḥala hāt 'unwānak* (*Before You Depart Give Me Your Address*) is difficult to ascribe to one particular category of poetry. For it deals with personal matters containing elements of love lyricism:

*I told you darling: don't desire!
Love in our world is base...*

and even elements of elegy:

*I will serenade you with my feelings
A posthumous hymn...*

so as to finally touch on the matters of global nature, such as the death of young people in the war in Bayrūt, hunger in Africa or misfortune in India. The lyrical speaker tells of the evil that has encompassed the world:

*You ask about our world
Whether it is still a bunker of evil
Whether evil still rules in it
And everything else forbidden reigns there
Beirut has brought you the best examples
The flower of youth
Dies from the bullets of the hunter
Or of a madman whose head is empty.
The hungry in Africa
And the misery in India they ask:
Are those who died people?
Thousands after thousands
And the world dances in adultery
Don't ask me about other news!
It is a fatal blow.²*

² Sa'ida Bint Ḥāṭir, *Qabla an tarḥala hāt 'unwānak* in: *Madd fī baḥr al-a'māq*, Masqaṭ 1986, pp. 167-176.

Sa'īda Bint Ḥāṭir possesses a particular gift for observation. In striking up a dialogue with the reader she involves him in the interpretational effort, by presenting a new vision of the world. She claims that the twentieth century totally changed the face of the world, both in terms of civilization and technology, as well as in the social sense. Man, regardless of his convictions, participates in this great current of changes. The poet attempts to show in her works the conflict between man's natural aspiration towards independence, love, the possibilities for realizing one's own aims and intentions, and the forms that are imposed by life in a given time and society. Sa'īda Bint Ḥāṭir's poetry is characterized by sensitivity, subtlety and delicacy. The themes examined, like love, become individual and personal through the naming of love 'adoration' in the poem *Wa-kaḏā al-ḥubb 'ibāda* (*In This Way Love is Adoration*):

[...]
*If the one we love
 Peas and jasmine
 Were to give us his answer:
 Those in love are drowned
 In the seas
 In the interior of a desert
 Where there is no water*

But:

*They see love like a mirage
 We ponder in illusion
 Both exhausted
 We constantly knock on her door
 Without weariness
 Without fatigue
 Finally dew will fall from the clouds*

*May be worry will disappear
 From my sky and hide
 Despite the years hiding
 Interrupting the circle of monotony*

[...]

So love is happiness and suffering
There is paradise and hell within it
Plains and deserts
Ask the sea wave
How many injured
Have come to it
Complaining about the fever of their sorrow
Mourning their love and heart
 [...]³

Something that was once bequeathed to the sphere of possibility, or of dreams that have not reached fruition. It seems as if love is an illusion. The second part of the poem confronts, by way of contrast, the realistic plane of things with the poetic where everything is possible. In the final part the lyrical voice undertakes an attempt to generalize and raise one's own personal sensations and dreams to a joint experience and sense of solidarity with those who feel and expect likewise. In the poem the author searches for a joint denominator for individual experience and that of the collective. Such an attempt can be found in many of her other works.

In one of the many beautiful poems, like the one entitled *Umūma* (*Motherhood*), or the poet as a future mother ponders what her child will be. The work is divided into three parts which describe the subsequent stages of motherhood: pregnancy, birth and care for the child. She describes the moment when the child, after many months together, leaves her body in an unusually emotional way. At times however she is overcome with fear for the future, which she must face. She hopes that her child will always find support in her and that she will always feel responsible for its life. The poetry is often presented as an instrument to fight for a just cause; hence its involvement of the nation in their daily matters and in their struggle for a better future. The poem *Anta nūr al-badr finā* (*You Are the Moonlight for Us*) is a panegyric in honour of Sultan Qābūs, as well as an ode to the Fatherland:

The sun of civilization has risen
And Oman has adorned itself with it.
Qābūs radiates his light

³ Sa'īda Bint Ḥāṭir, *Wa-kadā al-ḥubb 'ibāda*, op.cit., pp. 29-33.

Has flooded town and village with his prosperity
With his munificence he has fulfilled the country
In every valley and on every hill
And the nation blossoms
Assuming the attire of joy
 [...]

God the greatest gave us
Qābūs who united the nation
Qābūs built the state
Qābūs has recorded our glory
He carries us
To the lofty height
And returns our former might
Amongst the nations'⁴.

Sa'īda Bint Ḥāṭir declares war on the passing of time and with the same on the laws of nature. The poem *Anā man akūn?* (*Who Am I?*) is a manifestation of the storm of raving feelings upon the sight of a single grey hair. This is expressed in the form of a lyrical monologue directed to the 'you', which is the said grey hair. This monologue is full of accusations, hidden sorrow, unwillingness, and outright hatred:

[...]

And can you scoff?
At me and my anger
And my temptations
And destruction of the war I have waged
With the passing of time

But you're jeering?!
At the fear which
Has shaken
And deadened me
And which intensifies when the passion cools
With the streams of sweat on the brow

⁴ Sa'īda Bint Ḥāṭir, *Anta nūr al-badr finā*, op.cit., pp. 11-25.

But you're laughing?!
At my pain
And bitterness
And fear which sits at the bottom of my soul
Inherited over the course of the years.

But you're taunting?
The words I've said
When I saw you emerging
With my cursing
And disappointment
 [...] ⁵

The rhetorical questions directed here to the addressee are characteristic. These utterances do not hide the anger which is full of animosity. The subject betrays her own infirmity and weakness and admits to fear and horror which are brought about by the very fact of aging. For getting old is equal in meaning to the passing of time, which is in turn equal to destruction, suffering, the gradual and slow approach to an end that is unavoidable. An end that arouses fear in every living creature. The poet, with a good deal of humour, rolls out the heaviest of artillery pieces to destroy the enemy, or at least to erase the signs of destruction:

[...]
But you scoff?!
At the army which
I have mobilized
And equipped
That I have trained in the siege
Of the places you put up resistance.
 [...]
But you scoff?!
At my cunning and plots
At the recipe
And the dye bought
From a trusted

⁵ Sa'ida Bint Ḥāṭir, *Anā man akūn?*, op.cit., pp. 53-56.

Dealer in fragrances.
 [...]
 But you're laughing?!
At our combs
Mirrors
Oils
And jasmine flower elixir
 [...] ⁶

The efforts are without effect and are in vain, for time is not to be deceived. The persona is aware of the pointlessness of the battle when she is condemned in advance to defeat; for she cannot revolt against the natural eternal law that rules the world although with a woman's perverseness she still tries.

The story of people and nations is connected with the passing of time. Both the passing of time, as histories mutually supplement each other. The poem, *Ḥadīṭ imra'a* (*The Woman's Conversation*)

[...]
 How cruel you can be history
Blurring my features and telling stupid stories about me
 [...] ⁷

The poet through the lips of the lyrical speaker expresses opposition to the effacement of truth in life and history. For often a more convenient and acceptable version of events is handed down from one generation to another.

An inseparable element of history is war. War that has accompanied man since the dawn of time. It is connected to suffering and death. In the poem *Intiḥār ḥaḍāra* (*The Suicide of Civilization*) Sa'īda Bint Ḥāṭir shows the enormity of war's destructiveness. She asks the question; who dared bring about so much wrongdoing, lead to pain and suffering, which has changed beauty into smouldering ruins:

⁶ Ibid., pp. 56-59.

⁷ Sa'īda Bint Ḥāṭir, *Ḥadīṭ imra'a*, op.cit., p. 88.

[...]
*Who changed your world by my life
 And stirred up a bloody revolution?
 Bayrūt, I shout, Bayrūt!
 Words are born, and then die
 The colour of red, Oh! Bayrūt
 With the flames of fire like rubies
 He covered your land and sky
 He changed beauty into ruins
 [...]*⁸

The poet generalizes her thoughts and reflections upon the subject of war, and the cruelty of history that has been written in human blood, upon the example of Beirut—that great and noble centre of finance, trade and culture in the Middle East. The poet expresses her pain and despair with the addition of revolt in the following words:

[...]
*Bayrūt—Arabic intoxication
 Bayrūt—the passion of the West
 What has civilization given you?!
 A summer wedding night?!
 They hanged your friendship on the gallows...
 They laid joy to rest...
 They buried the golden days alive
 They annihilated the freedoms of the sun
 With the violence of barbaric peoples
 [...]
 In the past you were our pearl
 Bayrūt—true sons
 They are your children, for mother's freedom
 They died on the green earth
 [...]
 Bayrūt, mighty and strong,
 Why have they thrown you into the abyss?!
 [...]*⁹

⁸ Sa'īda Bint Ḥāṭir, *Intihār ḥadāra*, op.cit., pp. 145-146.

⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 146-149.

The shine and magnificence of a wonderful city is extinguished, covered by the dust of war. Its brave and true sons have fallen on the field of glory, and for their mothers, lost in sorrow and grief; there remain only the tears of despair. The poet clearly underlines the fact that Beirut was not the first centre of modern civilization to have committed 'suicide'. More than one civilization has committed it. History knows of many such examples and is sure to become acquainted with others. The poet considers us all to be responsible for the fate of the world, and that we all carry the burden of guilt:

[...]
The limbs of my body shouted: who of us is innocent
Let him come and cast the stone!
 [...]¹⁰

Here the specific nature of Sa'īda's creativity should be emphasized; tender, delicate employing delicate images and carefully selected metaphors and comparisons, though also being perceptive in relation to the world around her:

The music of the night
And the whisper of the flute weakens
There is enough in my heart of billowing waves
Of sighs
Farewell, my destiny
 [...]¹¹

Sa'īda Bint Ḥāṭir attempts in her poetry to address the widest possible circle of readers. She emphasizes the strong link between poetry and life. She considers that thanks to poetry the sense in human matters can be returned and that harmonious order can be restored to the world.

It seems that the poet's character and creativity is well defined by the words drawn from the poem *Ḥadīṭ imra'a*: "I feed on two opposites: the water of ice and fire"¹². Here is hidden the whole truth about Sa'īda Bint

¹⁰ Sa'īda Bint Ḥāṭir, *Ḥadīṭ imra'a*, op.cit., p. 89.

¹¹ Sa'īda Bint Ḥāṭir, *Laḥn tā'ih*, op.cit., p. 153.

¹² Sa'īda Bint Ḥāṭir, *Ḥadīṭ imra'a*, op.cit., p. 87.

Ḥāṭir al-Fārisī as a poet and a person. These two opposites rubbing together within her, two elements committed to paper in order to be given the shape of poetry; full of passion, hot and indestructible as fire; and delicate, soothing, quietly murmuring and cold as water.