

Barbara Michalak

Innovatory trends in modern Kuwaiti short story

Kuwaiti literature is very young and therefore the authors are also mostly young, only beginning their literary careers. Among these authors particularly interesting are: Laylā al-‘Uṭmān, Turayyā al-Baqṣamī, Sulaymān aš-Šaṭṭī, Sulaymān al-Ḥulayfī, Ismā‘īl Fahd Ismā‘īl and Walīd ar-Ruġayyib. They began to write at the time of the great development of Kuwaiti economy during the oil boom. They had to function in a very traditional society but did not stop them from dealing with difficult problems which Kuwait had to face during the age of rapid development.

Most of the Kuwaiti authors are hardly known outside their country; however, some stories by Ismā‘īl Fahd Ismā‘īl, Laylā al-‘Uṭmān, Walīd ar-Ruġayyib and Sulaymān aš-Šaṭṭī were translated and published in the representative collection *The Literature of Modern Arabia*.¹

The present study is devoted to the work of six most prominent writers whose stories were published in such collective publications as the above mentioned *The Literature of Modern Arabia*, *Udabā’ al-Kuwayt fī ʾāl-qarnayn*², *Udabā’ min al-ḥalīġ al-‘arabī*³, *Aš-Šawt aṭ-tānī fī ʾāl-qīṣṣa al-kuwaytiyya*⁴ as well as in literary magazines such as “Al-Ādāb”⁵ and “Al-Bayān”.⁶

All the authors consciously take part in discussing political, social and cultural problems in context of the changes which their country is witnessing. Very often they explore the question of tradition and its links with the past, but also stress its influence on delaying the cultural development of the country.

In past periods, particularly striking was the harmony between the inhabitants of Kuwait and the sea, the essential source of their income, wealth,

¹ Salma Kadra Jayyusi, *The Literature of Modern Arabia*, University of Texas Press, Austin 1989.

² Ḥālid Sa‘ūd az-Zayd, *Udabā’ al-Kuwayt fī qarnayn*, Kuwait 1980.

³ ‘Abd Allāh Aḥmad aš-Šabāṭ, *Udabā’ min al-Ḥalīġ al-‘Arabī*, Kuwait 1986.

⁴ Walīd Abū Bakr, *Aš-Šawt aṭ-tānī fī ʾāl-qīṣṣa al-kuwaytiyya*, Kuwait 1985.

⁵ Sulaymān aš-Šaṭṭī, *Tārīḥ al-qīṣṣa fī ʾāl-Kuwayt*, „Al-Adab” nos. II i III, Beirut 1989, p.66.

⁶ Šawqī Badr Yūsuf, *Layla al-‘Uṭmān wa-‘ālamuhā al-qaṣašī*, „Al-Bayān”, Kuwait September 1989, p. 63.

freedom, and the place of their work. There, the fishermen and pearl divers spent most of their lives. The rapid development of the country changed this; the men became less dependent on the sea and on the desert – their old-time allies. The young generation became opened for new developments and culture coming from the outside world, and it started rejecting tradition, which seemed to be too old-fashioned. The development within the realm of the material world appeared to be so quick that the cultural gap between the young and the old became practically unsurmountable. “We can say that Kuwaiti writers take on responsibilities for those changes which set in Kuwaiti society and which were caused by sudden and quick material changes”⁵.

Stories which concentrate on the subject of the past traditions are, in fact, studies on changes in the Kuwaiti society. The changing situation, the uncertain future, are especially worrying for the older generation. This is reflected, for example, in a story by Sulaymān aš-Šaṭṭī entitled *Al-Hāḡis wa-āl-ḡuṭām*⁶ in which the hero – an elderly construction worker – watches how old houses, which he once built, are being demolished. These houses are replaced by a great number of new constructions, which suit the needs of nouveau-riche Kuwaiti society. While watching this, an idea comes to him: he feels as though with the last demolished house his whole life comes to an end.

In the story *Waḡhāni fī ‘atma*⁷ also by Sulaymān aš-Šaṭṭī another respected trade is described: that of a shopkeeper. The hero represents the old-fashioned way of conducting trade: without any contracts. He is emotionally tied to his work, his feelings form an important part of his professional life. But in new Kuwait there is no place for such a traditional trade.

Another subject of Kuwaiti short story is the family life: the changing relationships within it are penetrated in detail. One of them is the tendency to reduce the role of the traditional head of the family: the father. Then there are analyses of woman’s obedience to man. These are the main themes of Laylā ‘Uṭmān’s short stories such as *Al-Faṣl al-qādīm*.⁸ Here, the main heroine submits all problems to the judgment of her brother-in-law, because

⁵ Walīd Abū Bakr, op.cit., p. 5-6.

⁶ Sulaymān aš-Šaṭṭī, *Al-Hāḡis wa-āl-ḡuṭām* from the collection *Aš-Šawṭ al-ḡāfiṭ*, Kuwait 1970, p. 84.

⁷ Sulaymān aš-Šaṭṭī, *Waḡhan fī ‘atma*, from the collection *Riḡāl min ar-rīf al-‘ālī*, Kuwait 1982, p. 89.

⁸ Laylā al-‘Uṭmān, *Al-faṣl al-qādīm*, from the collection *Imrā’a fī inā*, Kuwait 1976, 1st ed., p.27.

she has a small daughter. When, however, she is sure that the daughter - Ḥanān - is safe, she relieves herself from this duty. In other words, woman's obedience is interpreted as forced, resulting from either fear or need.

Often the problem of independence in love is raised; women were sometimes killed just because they had the courage of loving a man of their own choice. With this question we are confronted in Laylā 'Uṭmān's story *Al-Qalb wa-rā'ihāt al-ḥubz al-maḥrūq*⁹; where a girl is severely beaten by a mother jealous of her own son. The same subject is dealt with in Ismā'īl Fahd Ismā'īl's story *Al-Aqfāṣ wa-āl-luḡa al-muštāraka*¹⁰. The heroine of this story is a young, educated teacher. She experienced difficulties in adapting herself to life in a very small town. The man who was in love with her usually sat across the street, but any relationship between them was impossible because of the customs by which the society was ruled.

In their stories, Kuwaiti writers show us people from different social classes. We have the intelligentsia, the working classes, tradesmen and householders. The authors point out the reasons which made the people behave in a particular way. In the short story *Nuḡūm aqall... nuḡūm akṭar*¹¹ Walīd ar-Ruḡayyib compares the relationships within the society with the army. In his opinion, high official position makes it possible to some persons to interfere with the private life of other people. Misuse of authority is symptomatic for some short stories of this author.

Woman authors pay much attention to such subjects as traditional beliefs, superstitions and magic. Living in seclusion of their homes fortune telling and divination became their favourite pastime. Turayya al-Baqṣamī in the story *Umm Adam*¹² tells the story of those who believe in good and bad demons. The heroine: an elderly lady is well versed in the art of fortune-telling. This is why people decide to kill her: they are simply afraid of her, although in reality she is a very good and honest person.

A subject well suited for depicting tradition is the typical Kuwaiti (and Arabic for that matter) wedding ceremony. It starts from the choice of a fiancée and continues through various dealings till the wedding. The swindles concocted by the matchmakers lead to many misunderstandings. Such is the

⁹ Laylā al-'Uṭmān, *Al-qalb wa-rā'ihāt al-ḥubz al-maḥrūq* from the collection *Imrā'a fī inā'*, p. 97.

¹⁰ Ismā'īl Fahd Ismā'īl, *Al-aqfāṣ wa-āl-luḡa al-muštāraka* from a collection under the same title, Beirut 1979, 2nd ed., p. 7.

¹¹ Walīd ar-Ruḡayyib, *Nuḡūm aqall... nuḡūm akṭar* from the collection *Tal'uq nuqta tasquṭ ... taq*, Beirut 1983, p. 21.

¹² Turayā al-Baqṣamī, *Umm Adam* from the collection *Al-'Araq al-aswad*, Kuwait 1977, 1st ed., p. 20.

subject of Ṭurayyā al-Baqṣamī's story *'Arūs al-qamar*¹³. The matchmaker in an exaggerated form describes the bridegroom: "... he is as beautiful as the full moon" - he says. The words arouse the bride's fear and apprehension, she is afraid of this perfect husband. But in the end the truth is revealed, the bridegroom's "face is wrinkled like an old potato, and his hair is dyed".

The traditional marriage which is imposed on the girls represent still one of the major problems in the Gulf countries. Young people are forced to marry each other just to keep up blood ties. Marriage serves also to display the family's wealth. In the story *Zawāğ*¹⁴ by Sulaymān al-Ḥulayfī it is shown what role money plays in getting a bride. The hero, a rich shopkeeper, married a young girl, although his own nephew wanted to marry her. He could not however gain upper hand in the rivalry with his rich uncle. The story ends with a betrayal. The author watches the behaviour of the lovers, how their kisses and caresses transform into fervent love. Here Sulaymān al-Ḥulayfī sides with the lovers and chastises a marriage treated only as a transaction. The betrayal is portrayed as a sort of punishment for unjust marriage.

Discussing the position of women in traditional society in a very delicate matter. In Kuwait woman is considered to be a weak and helpless being, and no man would dare to embark this problem. No wonder then that women authors themselves discuss this question in their writings. Their experiences form a firm base for the best understanding what Kuwaiti women feel. Laylā al-'Uṭmān is the main representative of this feminine trend in Kuwaiti literature. In her longer and shorter stories she depicts women representing different social classes. The heroines are usually sensitive, perceptive women opened to the surrounding world. In her stories, there are described not only young women, but also elderly ladies, usually mothers, presented in negative light, and this despite the fact that she herself is a mother. The mother from the story *Al-Qalb wa-rā'iḥat al-ḥubz al-maḥrūq* does not support her own son but represents typical opportunism. She interferes in an unacceptable way with the life of her child, depriving him of his own free choice. Laylā al-'Uṭmān's heroines are constantly rebelled against their psychological restraints and each of them does it in her own particular way with accordance with their dignity. Laylā al-'Uṭmān's women are never indifferent and never bored, even if they have to face constantly the dilemma of contradictory feelings and anxiety. Often they are brought on a brink of a tragedy which may lead to crime, as in the story *Min malaff imrā'a*¹⁵. In another story:

¹³ T. al-Baqṣamī, *'Arūs al-qamar*, *ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁴ Sulaymān al-Ḥulayfī, *Zawāğ* from the collection *Haddāma*, Kuwait 1974, p. 53.

¹⁵ L. al-'Uṭmān, *Min malaff imrā'a* from the collection *Ar-raḥīl*, Kuwait 1984, 2nd ed., p. 31.

At-Timṭāl¹⁶ a very active woman is portrayed: a woman sculptor who regards herself as a working woman. A new phenomenon in present-day Kuwait, indicating in the same time the cultural developments in this country. Generally speaking, Laylā al-‘Uṭmān’s stories and short stories touch upon a wide range of problems encountered in contemporary Kuwaiti society, especially those which are linked with the position of women in different situations. of every day life.

Kuwaiti writers do not avoid delicate subjects such as extra-marital relations. They investigate and analyse this problem from many angles: those of the man and those of the woman. Woman betraying her husband - this is a new phenomenon in the Kuwaiti society. The reasons of this behaviour are explored by the authors; such is the attitude of Sulaymān al-Ḥulayfī in his story *Ya’kulūna ‘alā sufra sāḥina*¹⁷. Here, a husband and his wife deceive each other because - despite of their wealth - they both feel lonely. At the same time a number of other love-affairs are described: between the housemaster and his Indian servant, between a lady and her driver. At last the rich couples discovers that their little daughter also has an love affair.

The Kuwaiti authors pay rather little attention to immigrant workers although they form a major part of the society. It seems that the Kuwaitis isolate themselves from the immigrants. In a short story *Ta’luq nuqṭa tasqūṭ... ṭaq*¹⁸ by Walid ar-Ruḡayyib the hero arrives illegally in Kuwait. Soon he realizes that he will not get a well-paid job and therefore he accepts the worst and hardest works which bring neither money nor hopes for a better future for him and his children. In Sulaymān al-Ḥulayfī’s short story *Ta’šīrat ad-duḥūl*¹⁹ a young man cannot get a job and is therefore forced to leave the country, despite the fact that his arrival was quite legal.

Marriages between immigrants and Kuwaiti girls are strongly condemned; in her story *Lā ḥabar... lā* Laylā ‘Uṭmān²⁰ describes an immigrant lover of a Kuwaiti girl and the tragedy of separation between them despite deep love.

The main subject of the Kuwaiti short stories forms everyday life iof a modern and constantly changing society. The man is shown as forming a part of this society, sharing its present and past experiences. It is difficult to

¹⁶ L. al-‘Uṭmān, *At-timṭāl* from the collection *Fī āl-layl tā’ī āl-uuyūn*, Kuwait 1974, 2nd ed., p. 102.

¹⁷ Sulaymān al-Ḥulayfī, *Ya’kulūna ‘alā sufra sāḥina* from then collection *Haddāma*, Kuwait 1974, p. 9.

¹⁸ W. ar-Ruḡayyib, *Ta’luq nuqṭa tasqūṭ ... ṭaq* from a collection under the same title, Beirut 1983, p. 85.

¹⁹ S. al-Ḥulayfī, *Ta’šīrat duḥūl* from the collection *Al-maḡmū‘a aṭ-ṭāniya*, Kuwait 1987, p. 57.

²⁰ L. al-‘Uṭmān, *Lā ḥabar... lā ze* from the collection *Al-Ḥubb lahu šuwar*, Beirut 1983, 2nd ed., p. 64.

propose a relative evaluation of Kuwaiti authors. Rather, one could say that they represent similar literary standard, they are interested in similar subjects linked with the changes and present experiences of their society. They try to reflect the disputes taking place between different generations, and understand different points of view.

Kuwaiti short story is developing; who knows what its future will be; no doubt, however, that the experiences of the Iraqi invasion of 2nd August 1990 will weigh heavily on its subjects.