

RECENZJE

Barbara Michalak-Pikulska. *Modern Poetry and Prose of Oman, 1970-2000*, The Enigma Press, Kraków 2002, 440 pp.

This is not the first time Barbara Michalak-Pikulska has displayed her talent as a courageous scholar investigating literatures which are almost unknown to European critics and readers. On this occasion Omani literature is the target of her scientific interest. The author purposely limits the chronological frame of her study to 1970-2000, considering that "it is difficult to talk of the existence of cultural and literary life in Oman prior to Sultan Qābūs Ibn as-Sa'īd's taking power in 1970. With the exception of three schools ... there was nothing" (p. 11).

Numerous works of poetry and prose, including novels, of considerable merit, have appeared in Oman in the last few decades. In chronological sequence Michalak-Pikulska discusses each work and comments on the authors' biography and the influence of the environment on their maturing creativity, to which she devotes three sections of her book under the headings: *Modern Poetry of Oman* (pp. 23-155), *Modern Prose of Oman* (pp. 159-327) and *Women's Poetry and Prose* (pp. 331-424), accompanied by a Foreword (p. 7), Introduction (pp. 11-19), Conclusion (p. 425), a Bibliography both in Arabic and European languages (pp. 427-435) and an Index of authors (pp. 436-440).

The first section is further divided into three chapters entitled: *Classical Poets—Enlightened Intellectuals of the Beginning of the New Epoch* (pp. 23-55), *The at-Taf'ila Form in Modern Omani Poetry* (pp. 57-99) and *The Vanguard of Modern Omani poetry* (pp. 101-155). The study of Omani poetry is preceded by a technical introduction in which Michalak-Pikulska clarifies the essential concepts, such as poetry and prose, based on the fundamental ideas of Polish literary theorists, and presents a short survey of the main trends in the development of modern Arabic poetry as seen in the works of Sāmī al-Bārūdī and his successors Aḥmad Šawqī and Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm, as well as the Maḡar group of Syro-Lebanese writers and other literary movements which played an important role in the transformation and reconstruction of modern Arabic poetry, especially in the second half of the last century.

The intensive and dynamic development of modern Arabic poetry during this period is a unique phenomenon in the history of the genre over many centuries, and involves not only the poetical works themselves but also a number of theoretical issues, among them the problems of Arabic versification. Synthesizing her observations of the renewal of modern Arabic poetry and criticism, Michalak-Pikulska offers an interpretation of Omani poetry through an analysis of the works of ‘Abd Allāh aṭ-Ṭā‘ī, ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥalīlī, Abū Surūr al-Ġāmi‘ī and Maḥmūd al-Ḥuṣaybī, who represent the neo-classical trend characterized by adherence to the poetical canon and rules of the unity of the metre. At the same time these authors pave the way for experiments in the techniques of achieving the new poetic forms.

Influenced by spirit of the age, Omani poets direct their efforts towards experimenting with the form and rhythm of verse, and in doing so they are responsible for the appearance of a new type of poetry in Omani literature, known as taf‘īla poetry. Michalak-Pikulska asserts that “many poets started to compose *ši‘r at-taf‘īla* based on a single foot (taf‘īla) instead of the introduction of the entire metre” (p. 57) and she reviews the works of Sa‘īd aṣ-Ṣaqlāwī, Hilāl al-‘Āmirī, Ṣāliḥ al-Fahdī and others who composed taf‘īla poems and made significant contributions to the development of Omani poetry. She also offers poetic profiles of several young authors: Šubbar Ibn Šaraf, ‘Alī al-Mūsawī, ‘Alī Ibn Aḥmad al-Ma‘šanī, ‘Umar Ibn ‘Abd Allāh Maḥrūs aṣ-Ṣay‘arī and ‘Alī Ibn Sālim ar-Rawāḥī. These poets publish their works mainly in periodicals.

In Michalak-Pikulska’s opinion, “the dominant poetic movement in contemporary Omani poetry is that of poetic prose (*qaṣīdat an-naṭr*) ... characterized by an absence of feet and rhythms; there exists in their place a connection of words and cohesion in the construction of images” (p. 101). The author demonstrates this by analysing the works of ‘Īsā aṭ-Ṭā‘ī, Sayf ar-Raḥbī, Zāhir al-Ġāfirī, Muḥammad al-Ḥārīṭī, Ṭālib al-Ma‘marī and others, whom she describes as “the vanguard of Modern Omani poetry” (p. 101).

Modern Omani prose is at the centre of the second part of the book, which comprises four chapters: The beginnings of Literary fiction (pp. 159-174), The Development of Prose writing (pp. 175-218), The Flowering of Prose Writing (pp. 219-266) and The Young Generation (pp. 267-327). As Michalak-Pikulska’s study shows, the development of Omani prose has generally stayed within the mainstream trends of Arabic literature. One of the earliest examples of Omani prose literature is a novel written by ‘Abd Allāh aṭ-Ṭā‘ī, who is also well known for his poems, short stories and plays. He is the author of two novels: *Malā’ikat al-ḡabal al-aḥḍar* (1963) and *Aṣ-Širā‘ al-kabīr*, which were written between 1969 and 1971 and published posthu-

mously in 1981. Analysing their thematic ranges Michalak-Pikulska concludes that “aṭ-Ṭā‘ī’s prose work is a successful attempt to penetrate historical processes in the profile of human fate, considerations and attitudes” (p. 163). His novels, especially the last one, remind us of the works of the founders of the Arabic historical novel, for example Ğurġī Zaydān’s fiction, and they could usefully be analysed in more detail from a comparative-typological perspective in future study.

Michalak-Pikulska notes that “Omani writers particularly favour short narrative forms, in which an important position is held by the short story” (p. 159). Its first authors are Aḥmad Bilāl, Aḥmad az-Zubaydī and Maḥmūd al-Ḥuṣaybī, who published their collected short stories in the eighties. As she puts it, “Omani prose underwent in the second half of the 1980s enormous progress both in the matter of the formulation of content as in the elaboration of the means for artistic expression” (p. 175). This impression is reinforced by her analysis of the works of Su‘ūd al-Muẓaffar, Sayf as-Sa‘dī, ‘Alī al-Kalbānī, Ṣādiq al-‘Abdawānī and other representatives of “a realistic current” (p.175).

The nineties of the last century are a new stage in the development of Omani literature, which Michalak-Pikulska regards as the period of “the flowering of Prose Writing” (p. 219). In her interpretation, Muḥammad al-Qurmuṭī, Muḥammad al-Balūṣī, Yūnus al-Aḥzamī, ‘Alī al-Ma‘marī and Yaḥyā al-Mundarī “intended to create a new literary reality through the liberation of the writer from the rules of logical thought via the intuitive and spontaneous expression of thoughts and internal experience” (p. 219). To represent this reality these authors enrich their narrative technique by using the modern experience of world literature. This is also revealed in the works of the younger generation who started publishing in the middle of the nineties. Michalak-Pikulska states that “the writers of this period appear as creators aspiring towards individuality and originality, both in form and content” (p. 267), and she proceeds to identify the characteristics of contemporary Omani prose writers by analysing their fiction.

The third part of the monograph is dedicated to poetry and prose by Omani women. Michalak-Pikulska mentions an autobiographical work entitled *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess* by Sayyida Salma Bint Sa‘īd, published in Berlin already in 1886, as an interesting but isolated event in the literary history of Oman, since “the beginnings of modern literary activity amongst women in Oman can be placed in the 1980s ... The nineties are a time of eruption in literary activity both in the field of poetry and prose” (p. 331). On the literary horizon many female names appear: Sa‘īda Bint Ḥāṭir al-Fārisī, Turkiyya al-Būsa‘īdī, Nūra al-Bādī, Fāṭima Ṣa‘bān, Ḥawla aṭ-Ṭāhirī and

many others. All of them are “still developing in terms of their creativity” (p. 331), nevertheless their poetry and prose, published mostly as supplements to or in periodicals, have greatly enriched contemporary Omani literature.

Michalak-Pikulska consciously avoids drawing general conclusions from her observations of Omani poetry and prose, as both are still developing intensively. However, she compensates for this by the great variety of the source material she uses. Her book is illustrated by photographs of many Omani writers and augmented by valuable biographical information and quotations from their works, as well as by numerous extracts from interviews with one or another man of letters from Oman conducted by the author herself while preparing this study.

Therefore, although the book is based on a rich and wide collection of actual texts, it does not claim to be an exhaustive theoretical analysis of the outstanding products of Omani poetry and prose but rather it presents a comprehensive panorama of the development of the leading genres and trends in Omani literature as seen in the works of a large number of poets and prose writers over the last three decades. In this way Michalak-Pikulska makes an important contribution to modern Arabic studies and her book is a most welcome addition to the growing literature in this field.

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