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Search for identity in modern Arabic prose

Bedouins in headscarves, men in jeans and suits, they all speak one Arabic language and search for their place in the world, uncertainly, bravely, with hope. This is a picture that comes up from the modern Arab prose that has been developing since the second half of the 19th century, with its flourishing socio-moral trend. Its writers try to catch the nature of the surrounding reality (especially Muḥammad Taymūr (1921-1992), Maḥmūd Taymūr (1894-1973), Naḡīb Maḥfūz (born 1911), Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm (1898-1987) and Yūsuf Idrīs (1929-1991) in Egypt, and Ḥaydar Ḥaydar, Ḥannā Minā (born in 1924) in Syria, ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān Munīf (1933-2004) in Jordan, ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān Maḡīd ar-Rubay‘ī (born 1939) and others. From the works of this current there is a basic question looming-one about the identity of the character and its sources, which proves a strong position of the character himself as well as his unbreakable bonds to the world. In Arabic short stories and novels, the hero remains in the center of attention, not allowing for his significance to be snatched away, which has actually happened to his cousin in the Western literature (where, in fact, he is experiencing a triumphant come-back)¹. The hero creates the reality as well as is created by it, unbreakable ties and constant interferences take place between them. Thanks to that, as is proven by literature, characters shape their identities in two commonly distinguished aspects: social and personal ones.²

¹ M. Wołk, *Próba antropologii literackiej*, „Teksty drugie”, 2004, no. 6, p. 91.

² “Two other fundamental dimensions of identity arise from the individuals’ descriptions: a *social identity*, formulated in detail by Tajfel (1978) and cognitive psychologists, and a personal identity. The latter was first postulated by James (1989), logically constituted by the interiorization of social roles, and the “I” that forms a more personal component. Social identity implies categorical attribute that refer social groups which individuals belong, in which individuals invest their energy, and with which they identify themselves. (...) A review of the literature shows that personal identity consists of three levels: 1. Individuals feel they resemble the members of the “in-group” while feeling separate from those of the

The modern Arabic literature, from the beginning up to the present day, has been developing under the sign of searching and pondering on the phenomenon of identity with all its tragedy drama and increasing dynamism. For prose writers who are realists reaching it is like drawing a successful, creative picture of the reality.

Vanishing Bedouin culture

According to R. Patai, the Bedouin ethos considerably decided modern Arab mentality, where its characteristic features can be clearly seen.³

Against such a formulation, the picture of a Bedouin that emerges from the modern socio-moral prose proves him to be a person alienated from the surrounding reality, one being understood through the prism of his cultural difference since the Bedouins stick to their old truths, are extremely attached to the tribal ethos but, at the same time, they are not susceptible to changes. They still perceive themselves in the context of independence and high birth: a noble and free Bedouin knows well his extensive family tree, which roots can go back as far as to the times of the Prophet Muhammad, when Islam took its first steps in the Arab Peninsula and Muslims spread to the four corners of the globe under its banners. They reached Upper Egypt too, where a tribal ancestor of a presently living family could have settled down in a local village, just as it happened with one of the characters of "The Dowry" (*Mahr*)⁴ by Yaḥyā Ṭāhir 'Abd Allāh. The Bedouin as pictured by the modern prose, is aware of his extraction and knows well who he is and who he is not. To start with, he is not a peasant set still in his field or tripping in a little piece of land, which he would consider a kind of slavery. The Bedouin personifies the fight of the primary nature against the expansive culture, which makes one addicted and enslaves in return for its improvements and wealth. Therefore, the

"out-group". (...) 2. In addition to the objective sequence and hierarchy of past and present subgroups to which individuals belong, their choices and differential investments lead them to establish a subjective hierarchy of subgroups. (...) 3. The third level deals with the personal characteristics that distinguish individuals from others within the same groups (...)" - J.W.Berry, P.R. Dasen, T.S. Saraswathi (ed.) *Handbook of Cross-Cultural*

³ R. Patai, *The Arab Mind*, Macmillan Publishing Company, New York 1973, p. 98.

⁴ Cf. Yaḥyā Ṭāhir 'Abd Allāh, *Al-Kitābāt al-kāmila*, Al-Qāhira 1994, ed. II, pp. 183-256.

Bedouin intuitively prefers not to spoil his blood (understood both literally and symbolically) by peasant blood and thus marriages of his own children to this social group are considered a misalliance, just as in a novel “Rim is dyeing her hair” (*Rīm taṣbaġ ša ‘rahā*) by Maġīd Ṭubiyā, which takes place under the bright sun of the South Egypt, famous for its strict morality.

Bedouins from the modern Arab literature seem to fulfill quite faithfully conditions of the phenomenon called a social identity since they solicitously cultivate old patterns that are requisites for the community survival, among them the topos of bravery and courage. What else if not these phenomena can explain the dynamism of the Arab nomads, still haughty and free warriors, which is described by ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān Munīf in “The Land of Darkness” (*Arḍ as-sawād*)—a great epos about the Turkish Iraq which is just about to go into British hands.

“At the beginning one can think that it is enough to slightly oppose rushing Bedouins and the storm will finish soon. Everybody hopes that the assault will end as quickly as it has started, a matter of a while that will never be repeated. In general, individual Bedouins understand what is required of them and listen to orders. However, when they set off ahead in a group and they start to sing, their blood boils in their veins making them prove again and again their indefatigable strength and bravado, thus each of them loses himself in the rush and does whatever he wants, irrespectively of circumstances. They die one after the other, as if in a race, just to show others that they are better, the best. The more of warlike spirit one shows during an expedition, the more glory one covers himself with.”⁵

Therefore the governors of Iraq, then one of the districts of the Ottoman Empire, cannot handle the Bedouin impulsiveness and unrestrained freedom of action of the tribes now and again coming from the interior of the desert on the Euphrates.

As emotions flare up, the faithfulness to tradition gains an upper hand in Bedouins’ minds over rationalism, and the suspense between one and the other, the change of moods and points of view makes it even more difficult for the Bedouin community to adapt to modern conditions and cause difficulties in arranging relations between them and the world. (“But those Bedouins, as you know, gentlemen, say things they never do.”⁶).

The uncontrollable Bedouin soul that is so difficult to penetrate can be seen in a short-story by Fu’ād at-Takarī titled “The Baking Oven” (*At-*

⁵ Munīf, *Arḍ as-sawād*, Bayrut 1999, vol. I, p. 112.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

Tannūr)⁷. It is written in a form of a testimony given in the court of justice by a murderer of a sister-in-law, and the action takes place in a family with strong Bedouin traditions. The flow of Arabic eloquence, on the verge of an art of the oratory, which belonged to the ideal of a noble Arab as far as the times of Jāhiliyya, brings every now and then a change in the account of the events. The truth is lost and we can only guess that the young woman died innocently because of some veiled accusations of unfaithfulness that have been brought against her, which have jeopardized the delicate Bedouin honor and cried for revenge.

Without letting their arms slip from their hands, Bedouins also try to adapt to the surrounding world. It comes with a lot of difficulties and since a rifle still stays close to the heart of a tribal Arab, he readily becomes a watchman somewhere on the outskirts of a desert in Upper Egypt, just as it happens in Maḡīd Ṭūbiyā's novel "A Girl from al-Ġurūb village" (*ʿAdrāʿ al-Ġurūb*)⁸, where the hero stays in the company of his thinking-alike folk.

Here it is worth noticing, besides the other two mentioned earlier, another kind of identity: a cultural one. "Social identity is (...) inseparably connected to the society in which an individual functions from the moment he was born. While cultural identity would be the one based on an awareness of the existence of norms and values, an acceptance of a certain interpretation of the world, without a link to a specific community. Thus, cultural identity is founded on an assumption of an individual and intentional choice of values, often against the group. This kind of identity may in fact be equaled to social identity on the condition that the individual choices are restricted to what the group has on offer, or, in other words, if everything that comes from the outside is rejected."⁹

Joining the townspeople is incompatible with the ethics of wandering and fighting Bedouins or with their romantic myth so close to the heart of every Arabic writer. In comparison with the settled people in the same area, their rough features of a desert wayfarer are even more visible, as is their

⁷ Cf. Fu'ād at-Takarlī, *At-Tannūr* in: (ed.) Sālim ʿAbd al-Qādir as-Sāmarrāʿī, *Qaṣṣāṣūna min al-ʿIrāq. Dirāsa wa-muḥtārāt*, Baghdad, 1977, p. 91-96.

⁸ Maḡīd Ṭūbiyā, *ʿAdrāʿ al-Ġurūb*, Dār aš-Šarq, Al-Qāhira 1986, p. 19.

⁹ H. Manzer, *Tożsamość kulturowa w świetle społeczno-regulacyjnej koncepcji kultury (Cultural awareness in the light of socio-regulatory conception of culture)* in: J. Nikitorowicz, M. Sobiecki, D. Misiejuk (ed.) *Kultury tradycyjne a kultura Globalna (Traditional cultures and the global culture)*, Białystok 2002, p. 84.

complex nature, in which the aboriginal warlike spirit tries to suppress a shepherd's patience.

“In a simple tent made of camel wool, near the village of the noble bek ‘Imād, there lives Sulaymān Waydah with his wife and children. They are wandering Arabs, Bedouins who make a living from raising sheep. They ceaselessly drive their sheep from place to place in search of pastures rich in tall grass that can feed the cattle. Sulaymān inspires respect and fear, that is why people call him an Bedouin šayḥ. He is well built, an athlete with wide shoulders. His face of sharp features stands out and Sulaymān catches the eye when he is walking like that, wrapped in his loose, white robe, with his she-camel following slowly. He smokes tobacco in a reed pipe and sings songs, monotonously and lengthily, keeping the same rhythm! You may have an impression of looking at a howling wolf. He flies into passion easily and, when accosted by someone, he gets fits of temper and reminds of a raging bull. However, as easily he submits to joy. If you show him a bit of liking, he is as gentle as a lamb. He seems then pure cordiality and goodness, totally devoted to you.”¹⁰

As if confirming their belonging to this vanishing and peripheral culture, Bedouin characters take place on the margins of plots in socio-moral prose; the plots are dominated by alienation motifs, the nomads are alienated from the surrounding world, they come into conflicts with a culturally different majority that they share their living area with. Scantiness strikes in pictures of Bedouin life since extremely limited possession makes the itinerant mode of life easier. For them, tribal Arabs, the surrounding world, the settled culture from which they try to keep their distance, just as for the reader, mean modern forms of living, while the Bedouin existence on the pages of books seems to be no more than poverty and discomfort. In a short story by Yūsuf Idrīs “The Bet” (*Ar-Rihān*), in a country Egyptian café, an unbearable boredom of the hot afternoon is broken by an arrival of a guest who speaks Arabic just as the peasants do but who differs so much from them in his looks and manners. All eyes turn towards this thin and tall Bedouin with a lamb on his shoulder and an indispensable scarf. He makes them wonder when, because of the bet, he devours a hundred of shapely figs. Thus, according to the Bedouin tradition, he makes himself stand out and show off, although in a caricatured form suiting the changed times, as well as he satisfies his

¹⁰ Maḥmūd Taymūr, (1970) *Abū ‘Arab* in: Maḥmūd Taymūr, *Qāla ar-rāwī*, Al-Qāhira 1970, p. 223.

hunger, by the way, not noticed by those present. He pays dearly for it later, however, suffering alone and with dignity, away from the human eyes.¹¹

The picture of the Bedouin culture formulated in this prose results from its mimesis, objectivity tendencies, and convincing descriptions close to reliable documentaries. The Bedouin environment as the core of the Arab Peninsula population develops a special significance in “The Labyrinth” (*At-Tayh*, from a five-book series of “Cities of Salt” (*Mudun al-millḥ*) by ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān Munīf, where it is shown how it is undergoing a rapid modernization resulting from the discovery of crude oil. Bedouins are turning from shepherds into unqualified physical workers harnessed to the routine of building an industrial city, growing rapidly on the junction of the sea and the desert (in an unspecified place at the Persian Gulf)). Munīf spares no pain describing ethnographically, almost like in a great report, the “civilizing” of the desert, however without the flourish of the trumpets that accompanied a similar process in the “wild” American continent, and the speed and impetus of the described actions make the reader consternated.¹² The tribal Arabs seem to be completely helpless against progress mechanisms that herald a coming globalization, although the word (*‘awlama*) will enter an Arabic dictionary only at the end of the 20th century.

In the title of his short story, “Where are you going to, Bedouin?” (*Ilā ayna ayyuhā al-Badawī?*), a Libyan writer, Ibrāhīm al-Konī, a Tuareg himself, belonging to one of the great ancient peoples, a minority leading a nomadic life on the verge of the desert, asks a question which importance is difficult to be overestimated: about results of the clash and encounter of civilizations, starting from the smallest ones.

The Bedouin theme keeps its importance in Arabic prose as present on its pages, as well as absent or marginalized since its protagonists mostly are not Bedouins. Characters in their characteristic dress revealing their tribal attachment lure somewhere in the background, just like the father of the hero, an educated Iraqi painter, (in a novel by ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān ar-Rubay‘ī “The Parallels and the Meridians” (*Huṭūṭ at-ṭūl... huṭūṭ al-‘ard*)) or a beautiful Bedouin girl from the same book.¹³ In the world’s eyes, the

¹¹ Cf. Yūsuf Idrīs, *Rihān* in: Yūsuf Idrīs *Arḥaṣ layālī*, Al-Qāhira n.d., pp. 84-87.

¹² Cf. ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān Munīf, *At-Tayh. Mudun al-millḥ*, Beirut 1992, IV ed., pp. 184ff.

¹³ Cf. ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān Mağīd ar-Rubay‘ī, *Huṭūṭ at-ṭūl... huṭūṭ al-‘ard*, Sūsa-Tūnus 1983, pp. 100, 172.

Bedouin with his scarf, horse and camel is a personification of otherness, a different culture, he attracts and repels by his mysteriousness.

The shaking ground of the 20th century

Arabic prose writers, especially those in the current of socio-moral realism, draw a picture of the Arab world reviving in the 20th century after the collapse of the Muslim civilization - modern and divided, closely associated to the West, uncertain of its identity. "Serious cultural conflicts can lead to cognitive dissonance and difficulties in the construction of a coherent identity."¹⁴ The prose writers prove that the opposition of ours-theirs is represented in two main variants: "we" are Arabs, inheritors of the great past and users of one culture, as well as people from the same country; the strangers are understood as Europe and, more generally, the West, as well as the inhabitants of other, not one's own, Arabic countries.

Feeling of Arabiness

The West, as shown in prose works, is for the 20th-century Arab world at least an ambivalent phenomena. While Europeans are penetrating the East, Arabs are acquiring their culture among contradictory feelings of acceptance, admiration, rage, resistance, and fight. On the pages of books, they plot, rise, and fight stubbornly with arms in their hands against the British. (Egypt: among others the works of Nağīb Maḥfūz "The Trilogy of Cairo" (*Al-Tulāṭīyya*) and "The Beginning and the End" (*Bidāya wa-an-nihāya*); also Bahā Ṭāhir, "East from the Palm Grove" (*Šarq an-naḥīl*); Iraq: in 'Abd ar-Raḥmān ar-Rubay'ī's prose-novels: "The Nest" (*Wakr*) and "The Tattoo" (*Al-Wašm*); and Palestine, especially taking into consideration Ġassān Kanafānī). It is Kanafānī, a well-known Palestinian prose writer, killed in an ambush in 1972, that paints in his novels (e.g. "Men in the Sun" (*Riğāl fī aš-šams*), both literally and symbolically, dramatic pictures of the Palestinian fight for independence.

The feeling of Arabic unity and solidarity gets revived in opposition to the British colonialism in the Middle East and the French one in Maghreb. An expression of such an anti-French attitude from that time can be found

¹⁴ J. W. Berry et al., op. cit., p. 55.

in works by Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ al-Ġābirī (Tunisia) or Aṭ-Ṭāhir Wattār (Algeria)¹⁵, ‘Abd al-Mağīd Ibn Ġallūn (Morocco)¹⁶, Ar-Rubay‘ī’s novel “The Parallels and the Meridians” or Ḥaydar Ḥaydar’s “The Seaweed Feast” (*Walīma li-a ‘šāb al-baḥr*). The French colonialism will stay a point of reference for the present day in Algeria for long.

“Don’t cry, Ḥayra! Joy follows grief. The revolution has finished and we can enjoy our land. Who would have believed we would survive till this day? What dark days have been our share! They were stretched for ages yet they finished, thank God. France threatened, you could hear her raised voice, she filled the earth and the sky with rumble, but finally she got defeated, withdrew and left the land to its people. Ḥayra interrupted her:

– Painful memories have remained, auntie. We have buried our best people.”¹⁷

However, despite of the whole drama of the Palestinian case, it is not a fighter with his rifle that becomes the hero of the 20th-century Arabic prose, but an educated or learned *muṭaqqaf* (an intellectual), who absorbs the accomplishments of the Western culture, who, in spite of his land’s colonial past, can appreciate the greatness of Camus, Stendhal, Malreaux¹⁸, Brecht’s “Caucasian Chalk Wheel”¹⁹, reads “The Steppe Wolf” by Hesse²⁰, Dostoyevski²¹ and French magazines (Ibrāhīm ‘Abd Allāh Ibrāhīm, *Dāt al-aẓāfir at-ṭawīla*²²). This intellectual readily gets educated in Paris, where he spends a few years (Al-Ġābirī, “The Sea Leads to an Oasis” (*Al-Baḥr yanšur al-wāḥa*)) and finally settles down as an immigrant unable to melt into the difficult, post-colonial fate of his country (Wasīnī al-A‘raġ, “Remembering Water. Extreme Madness.” (*Dākirat al-mā’. Miḥnat al-ġunūn al-‘arī*)), gone to study in one of the European cities (‘Abd ar-

¹⁵ Cf. K. Skarżyńska Bocheńska, *Tunezja* (in:) J. Bielawski (ed.) (1989). *Nowa i współczesna literatura arabska 19 i 20 w. Literatura arabskiego Maghrebu*, PWN. Warszawa 1989, pp. 406ff., 524ff.

¹⁶ J. Kozłowska (1989). *Maroko* (in:) Bielawski (ed.) (1989). *Nowa i współczesna literatura arabska 19 i 20 w. Literatura arabskiego Maghrebu*. Warszawa: PWN. p. 438.

¹⁷ ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān Ibn Ḥaddūqa, (undated). *Rīḥ al-ġanūb*, Al-Ġazā’ir undated, pp. 29-30.

¹⁸ Ḥaydar Ḥaydar (2000). *Walīma li-a ‘sāb al-baḥr (našīd al-mawt)*. Dimašq 2000, p. 23.

¹⁹ Ḥaydar Ḥaydar, *Šumūs al-Ġaġar*. Dimašq 1997, p. 4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

²¹ A.M. Ar-Rubay‘ī, *Al-Anhār*, Baghdad 1974, p. 71

²² ‘Abd Allāh Ibrāhīm, *Dāt al-aẓāfir at-ṭawīla* in: (ed.) Muḥammad aš-Šādiq ‘Afīfī, *Al-Qiṣṣa al-maġribiyya al-ḥadīta*, Ad-Dār al-Bayḍā’, p. 177.

Rahmān Munīf, “A Pagan Love Story” (*Qiṣṣat al-ḥubb al-mağūsiyya*) such as London (Aṭ-Ṭayyib Ṣālih, “Season of Migration to the North” (*Mawsim al-ḥiğra ilā aš-šamāl*))²³, where he becomes imbued with Western moral liberty, to reject it when he comes back home.

Arab intellectuals, on one hand, oppose the Western culture, but on the other, continuously look for getting in touch with it. In Ar-Rubay‘ī’s “The Parallels and the Meridians,” the characters, Iraqis, Lebanese, Palestinians, Tunisians, naturally cross the border between the Arabic and the Western worlds, fly to the biggest European capitals, and then go back home—to the Middle East or Maghreb.

The characters of intellectuals seem to be suspended between both worlds, with feelings of belonging and not belonging to any of them, thus, the question of identity becomes even more crucial. They themselves ask the question again and again on the pages of their prose works.

With care, they take into consideration the notion of the Arabiness, for which the key reference system is the heritage of the past. To be an Arab is to cultivate it, going back as far as the times when the Bedouin poetry, held in reverence until now, was offering models of life and beauty: “We, the Arabs, each of us, inside, is a poet.” (Ar-Rubay‘ī, “Anywhere in the East” (*Ayyi al-ğiha aš-šarq*) from “The woman from here, the man from there” (*Imra’a min hunā, rağul min hunāka*)²⁴. It also means, in the heat of 1967 fighting (the Six-Day War against Israel, which, after all, ended with the defeat of the Arabs) reminding of their own glory, understood as eternal: “The banner of Arabiness will stay with us” (Bahā’ Ṭāhir, “Aunt Ṣafīyya and a nunnery” (*Hālātī Ṣafīyya wa-ad-dayr*)²⁵. The feeling of Arabism grows even stronger in reaction to another culture.

Such an attitude is visible in Algeria, romanized by colonialism. “The girl is asking if Arabs have got lost. Have they lost their souls? Surely, the war has changed nothing. Do Arabs regret what they have done? Are they afraid of changes? What would have happened if they sailed into shallow

²³ See: the plots of the novels: Muḥammad Ṣālih al-Ğābirī, *Al-Baḥr yanšur al-wāḥa*, Libiyā-Tūnus 1980; Wasīnī Al-A‘rağ, *Ḍākirat al-mā’*. *Miḥnat al-ğunūn al-‘arī*, Köln 1997; ‘Abd ar-Rahmān Munīf, *Qiṣṣat ḥubb al-mağūsiyya*, Bağdād 1984; Ṣālih, aṭ-Ṭayyib (1966). *Mawsim al-ḥiğra ilā aš-šamāl*, “Ḥiwār”, 24/25, no. 6, pp. 55–87.

²⁴ ‘A.M. ar-Rubay‘ī, *Ayyi ġihat aš-šarq* in: ‘A.M. ar-Rubay‘ī, *Imra’a min hunā, rağul min hunāk*, Sūsa-Tūnus. 1998, p. 119.

²⁵ Bahā’ Ṭāhir, *Hālātī Ṣafīyya wa-ad-dayr*, Al-Qāhira 1999, p. 12.

waters to begin from the scratch and close the past? Then she is asking if the Arabs from the East are doing better.

The language teacher is smiling:

- They are all Arabs. They unite with the past and the longing for it comes back in waves.

- No, I don't believe it. I think that you, in the East, are more modern. You have been given lesser blows. She is getting more enthusiastic and some of the sentence she is saying in Arabic and some in French. She is not aware, however, that she is in the eye of the storm.

- It is a complicated matter. Every country is different and exceptional.

- We live having complexes about Europeans. Colonialism- yes, it did its bit. But we are still lost. The loss is permanent and that is a tragedy.

- Not really. The reverie about history can also bring to ruin."²⁶

The feeling of loss is facilitated by the relationship with Europe- in the past and now, ages ago and at the present. Arabs look at one another questioning Western stereotypes about themselves resulting from that relationship: "They have sown a conviction in our minds that Muslims and Arabs are invaders and conquerors since it was them that conquered Spain, Sicily and got as far as Poitiers. They argue that the Quran descends from the Torah and the Gospels, and that Arabic is the language of religion and poetry, not of science, which has led Arabs to backwardness."²⁷

Although the East and the West are contrary to each other, as the writers try to prove, they also need each other. An expression of that need is Orientalism, which attracts newcomers from the West, such as the Austrian Arabist in "The Parallels..." Ar-Rubay'ī's, who passionately translates Egyptian literature travelling between Cairo and Upper Egypt, and whom we get to know while having an affair with an Iraqi painter.²⁸ Orientalism becomes an ominous phenomenon in Munīf's novels. In his "Labyrinth", Americans are not trusted by Bedouins just because they know Arabic and the Quran, their knowledge is met with a shrug of shoulders. The motif of Orientalism takes a prime importance in "The Land of Darkness" by the same author, where an Englishman, from the times of the British exploration of the Ottoman Empire, fascinated by the Orient (although, as the action develops, we lose the certainty about to what extent

²⁶ Haydar, *Walīma...*, op.cit., p. 25.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²⁸ 'A.M. ar-Rubay'ī, *Huṭūt...*, op.cit., p. 215.

it is a real fascination or a planned career), learns languages: Arabic, Persian and Turkish, and after that he arranges his life according to that choice. He acts according to a motto: "Language is the key, the sunny East is the direction"²⁹, and he starts to make a diplomatic career in Baghdad under the Turkish rule, becoming an influential British consul. The faithful servant of Her Majesty is looking for reasons of difficulties in the relationship between Arabs and the West with a dash of an anthropologist and a shrewdness of a politician:

"Those eastern people do not realize that it is not only about the way they behave. The problem goes deeper.

After a while:

- During my last visit to the United Kingdom and a few European countries, I came to the conclusion that in what the East and Europe differs is not geography or time, but also the way of thinking, the mentality."³⁰

The diary kept by the British consul is illustrious; from it there emerges a picture of an Arabic personality, drawn as a cold report, on the bottom of which, however, ambers of tense European-Arabic relationship smoulder. It is, however, left to a subjective evaluation of the reader.

"The consul has written: in this country nothing happens without the noise and screaming, which are completely unnecessary at the given moment and the given task. Even animals are restless, bleating, mooing, squeaking, when somebody is offending their master in a loud voice. (...) At the bottom of the mountain, our group was welcomed by two Ḥālīd's sons, at the head of guards, two hundred knights in full armour. When the sentry met us, terrible racket sounded and there started a noise difficult to describe. Only one who has attained an honour of Arabic hospitality knows what it was about. As for horses, animals do not know the rules of hospitality, our horses weren't liked by the other and it came near fighting. Kurdish horses are spiteful and easily get angry. Everywhere there was heard neighing, shouting, racket, noises of fighting."³¹

'Abd ar-Raḥmān Munīf presents the picture of the surrounding world as seen through the eyes of educated Europeans. It is an important theme in "Long-Distance Race" (*Sibāq al-masāfāt at-ṭawīla*), where the hero, a British and an agent of a Western intelligence. Munīf leaves it to the reader an evaluation of the Arabic spontaneity, a decision to what extent their hot

²⁹ 'A. Munīf, *Ard as-sawād*, op.cit. p. 86.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 102.

³¹ Ibid., p. 185.

temperament is reprehensible, as Western observers want it, and to what extent it is creative and tempting.

As the British consul in “The Land of Darkness” claims: “The people of the East love two things: the past and great words. Quickly, they change into loud words. They rest in the shade of those words. They don’t see that the past has gone for ever and will not be back. They don’t know that the times they live in are different. Thus, they are like the drunk and lost. They live neither in the past nor the present. The one strong and powerful in the past has lost his might. This way we may achieve our aim in times when they consider themselves to be inheritors of more than one civilization and more than one empire. Civilization is like a river, it cannot stop in its development nor remain in one specific state. That makes the secret of our present power.”³²

In Munīf’s prose a number of meanings clash, on one hand there are such notions as Arabs, the East, nature, feelings, intuition, on the other hand—pictures of the West, Europe, culture, technically-dominated civilization, rationalism and cold, logical observation. Prose writers suggest that the former gain an increasing suggestiveness under the influence of the latter. In the process, the feeling of being an Arab is increasing and the Arabic identity is getting consolidated.

Ġurba—alienation and the fate of emigration

Against the notion of stability-stagnation resulting from the life in out-of-the-way villages and folk lanes of towns, seen especially in the authors mentioned above, the modern prose opposes not only an attempt of matching the modernity but also the concept of *ġurba* (alienation), getting stronger with the development of the Palestinian emigration and its significance as a literary theme.³³ This notion, as formulated by prosaists, is based on an oppressive feeling of being uprooted, the partial belonging to the world which is half familiar, half strange. It leads to wandering in search of one’s own place in one’s own country as well as abroad.

A young teacher from Al-Ġābirī’s novel “The Sea Leads to an Oasis”, after leaving his native village buried on the verge of the desert, is looking

³² Ibid., p. 203.

³³ I. Camera d’Afflitto, *Letteratura Araba Contemporanea dalla nahdah a oggi*, Carocci editore, Roma 1998, p. 259ff.

for new sources of identity, with varying success and growing sense of dissatisfaction. Once a homeboy, once a stranger in the urban environment, and even more alienated after returning from Europe, he finally re-discovers his village and comes back home in the sense of a bond with his own community.

The great Arabic exodus continues. In prose works it can be seen that throngs of Palestinians, Iraqis or Lebanese go to all corners of the world in the books by Kanafānī, in the novel “The Gypsies’ Sun” by Ḥaydar Ḥaydar, and especially in Ar-Rubay‘ī’s prose. In his novels, thousands of Iraqi citizens live from one dramatic event to the other—from the 1958 Revolution and overthrowing the monarchy (“The Moon and the Walls” (*Al-Qamar wa-as-sūr*), The Tattoo (*Al-Wašm*) to the 1968 uprising (“The Days” (*Al-Anhār*), which encourages emigrating, and its apogee brought by “The Parallels and the Meridians” (*Ḥuṭūṭ al-‘ard wa-ḥuṭūṭ at-tūl*). As psychology argues: “Ethnic or national identity is not usually activated in everyday experience. Consciousness of it is revived in situations like migration or mixed marriage, and in situations of change of threats to cultural values or national identity, like war.”³⁴

The emigration as shown in prose is a unique phenomenon, one of its kind, because going to another Arabic country that is not one’s own, one is at home and not at home, there are countrymen around as long as the border remains invisible and the basic meaning is retained by the language and the way of thinking, however felt as strangers when divisions catch the attention. The Arabic world in its literary formulations that make the whole picture seems to live a double life as a big community as well as a collection of modern countries. As throughout centuries, now it also has its capitals, the most important ones being Beirut and Baghdad, as well as the frequented routes to Maghreb and the Arabic Peninsula.

On the pages of books, Beirut—inversely proportionally to the size of Lebanon, one of the smallest Arabic countries, seems to be the real capital of the region. Lebanon being half-Christian and half-Muslim, and the city-open and welcoming, rich in patterns and possibilities, strikes with cosmopolitanism at first sight: its hotels, breath-taking show business, crowds of tourists from all over the world, endless business done within the frames of industry and politics (especially in ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān Munīf’s novel “Long-Distance Race” and Ġāda as-Sammān’s “Beirut 75” (*Bayrūt 75*).

³⁴ Berry et al., op.cit., p. 54.

Lebanon also means an ancient civilization and a luxuriant, phenomenal nature, where the sea and the mountains fight for an upper hand, Muslims and Christians living shoulder to shoulder. The prose tries to render the unusual picture of the country. Christian families owe their living standards to land and estates as well as connections to the French culture. This, however, does not help Yūsuf, a Christian intellectual and decadent, who is looking for his place in the surrounding reality: tens of times he changes his job, he tries to write like the famous Lebanese writer-Ğubrān Ḥalīl Ğubrān³⁵ (Minā, “The Snow is Falling in through the Window” (*At-Ṭalğ ya’ū min an-nāfiḍa*). The tale of Lebanon in the mystical-like style of that author creates its importance in the sphere of spiritual experience. In his novel, there is a view spread of a village situated somewhere in Lebanese Kasrawān:

“I sat on a huge rock growing towards the valley. It was the sunset, an enormous, terrifying quietness prevailed, which was devouring everything around, as if the whole world sunk into silence. ‘Take off your sandals, Moses, you are in a holy place’. Is the place holy because it seems so deserted at that hour? Man should get baptized with silence, not water, because in silence he goes back to his roots, to nature from which he comes down and to which he belongs to. He gets cleansed and raises up so that he disappears in the clouds and goes to meet the God. He experiences a revelation, in the mountains as these God revealed Himself to the Saviour in the shape of light, just as He did to Moses before, as a burning bush in the desert. The revelation came in vain in the mountains of Lebanon. Those mountains, with all their greatness and beauty dominate the world, and the man standing on their top almost touches the sky, feeds on the air, and the air in the mountains is nutritious, bodies of the mountain sons being the best proof.” (Minā, *At-Ṭalğ...*)³⁶

Lebanon, whose people, in the 19th century, readily emigrated to the West to look for different ways of living³⁷, (e.g. Ar-Rubay‘ī “The Parallels...”) is the homeland of the great Arabic emigration. The café tables in Beirut are taken by politicizing intellectuals. Beirut is friendly and hospitable, a haven for lost refugees, looking for jobs and ways of living. However, here one can be so much at home and away, the feeling of from here and a stranger troubles, the identity loses its cohesion. Fayāḍ is only

³⁵ Ḥannā Minā, *At-Ṭalğ ya’ū min an-nāfiḍa*, Bayrut 1999, p. 181.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

³⁷ ‘A. M. ar-Rubay‘ī, *Ḥuṭūṭ...*, p. 14.

an immigrant from the neighbouring Syria, yet he feels a stranger³⁸ (Minā, *At-Talğ*...) and lost, as if Damascus was light years away, not mere 100 kilometers, with taxis heading there every now and then. Suffering from the distance, he tries to define the state he is in during an internal discussion: “I am now, in a way, in exile. (...) But Lebanon is Lebanon and everybody can find a refuge here.” (ibid. page 16)³⁹

This beautiful Lebanon, divided in respect of religion, maybe too hospitable for all kinds of newcomers, starts to lose its coherence in the second half of the 20th century. The war drama unfolds itself and Lebanon survives 16 years of tragic civil war, during which Beirut gets devastated, rivers of blood stream down not suppressing but emphasizing divisions that has split the country, especially in the famous novel by Ġāda as-Sammān “Beirut Nightmares” (*Kawābīs Bayrūt*).

Arabs’ eyes turn towards Egypt, especially Cairo, called “the Mother of the world” (*Al-Qāhira umm ad-dunyā*). The well-known nickname of the city is reminded by an Algerian woman in Ḥaydar Ḥaydar’s novel “The Feats of the Seaweed.” She is fascinated by the Egyptian culture, its intellectual atmosphere, creative freedom and passion of the Egyptians.⁴⁰ Egypt has its own stormy history, wars, in the 20th century it takes on its shoulders the odium of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there sounds the voice of Ġamāl ‘Abd an-Nāṣir—a controversial figure, a spokesman for panarabism, loved and hated at the same time.

“I don’t know Paris or any of other capitals that intellectuals have in their minds, but I have known the whole land of the Arabs since the moment, that day, I woke up at the voice of Ġamāl ‘Abd an-Nāṣir’s. I have crossed it in three months, with only a little suitcase in hand, and in it I had my casids and clothes.”⁴¹

Arabic emigrants head also towards Maghreb. In his odyssey from Ar-Rubay‘ī’s novel “The Parallels and the Meridians” Ġiyāt gets as far as Tunisia, where his biography ends and where, together with other newcomers from the Near East, he goes through his emigrant fate, tossed by contradictions: the feelings of alienation, the fear of getting uprooted, the need to affirm Arabism, the need to be an Iraqī, and the necessity to adapt. Maḥdī al-Ġawād, another immigrant from Iraq, in a similar story from Ḥaydar Ḥaydar’s “The Seaweed Feast,” gets to Algeria, where he

³⁸ H. Minā, *At-Talğ*... op.cit. . p. 15.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 41.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 34.

⁴¹ Ar-Rubay‘ī, *Ḥuṭūṭ*..., p. 95.

settles down as a teacher in the Algerian town ‘Annāba, where he suffers from the dislike of the environment. Inhabitants of Algeria in 1990s everyday experience the threat of terrorist attacks carried out by fanatics, as in the novel by Wāsīnī al-A‘rağ “Remembering Water...”

The eyes turn also towards the Arabic Peninsula, attracting an economic emigration; to work in Saudi Arabia go a Palestinian couple from “The Gypsies’ Sun” by Ḥaydar Ḥaydar, Iraqi graduates from the Baghdad University as in Ar-Rubay‘ī’s “The Days” and “The Tattoo”, an Egyptian engineer in “The Girl from the Ġurūb Village” by Ṭūbiyā. They proceed also to Kuwait, “where one can earn in a year as much as in Iraq in twenty years” (Ġāzī al-‘Abādī, “The Wall” (*As-Sūr*)⁴²

Arabic immigrants cross the borders of their familiar-strange world too and wander further on with an ease of cosmopolitans and a torment of the search for their own place, constantly fighting against red tape. Just as does the hero of “Abū Hurayra and Kūğīka” (*Abu Hurayra wa-Kūğīka*) by Dū an-Nūn Ayyūb. He, with a quiet consent of the authorities, cooks up documents in the socialist Czechoslovakia.⁴³

The motif of *ğurba* becomes the foundation of the literary picture of the Arabic identity that was shaped in the 20th century. The identity goes beyond social conditions as well as beyond personal aspirations and goals. Although the hero of Arabic prose, according to the requirements of realism, retains his individualized features, yet, to a great extent, he identifies himself with the world of the familiar, which is expressed by a common culture with all its riches. In the center of the prose one can find a feeling of cultural unity that serves as a point of reference for decisions and actions of an individual, as well as for the way in which he sees and describes himself.

⁴² Ġāzī al-‘Abādī, *As-Sūr* (in) S. ‘A. as-Sāmarrā’ī, *Qaṣṣāṣūna min al-‘Irāq*, op. cit., p. 344.

⁴³ Dū an-Nūn Ayyūb, *Abū Hurayra wa-Kūğīka*, Sūsa-Tūnus undated. p. 133.