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### Unembellished Reality — a View of Contemporary Life through Stories by Walīd ar-Ruġayyib

Walīd ar-Ruġayyib is a young writer, born in Kuwait on January 1954, in a traditional Kuwaiti family. He learned to appreciate art and beauty from his early childhood. His grandfather used to recite the Koran to him, his mother and his aunts used to sing beautiful, old Kuwaiti songs to him, his father was a poet (he died in 1986. Since then Walīd started looking for his father's works. He intended to publish them in future). His uncle Ḥammād ar-Ruġayyib, now aged 70, brought in the 1940's the dramatic art to Kuwait for the first time. He is also a composer.

The young Walīd took up the family interests: he learned to play the accordion, he painted, he wrote literary compositions, and he spent every free moment reading. When he was 18, he got interested in humanism, in philosophy and in writing stories. His first story, *Al-Ḥadar*, was published in 1976 in the newspaper "Al-Waṭan". He backed up his interests by constant study. He completed pedagogical studies in the U.S.A. where he obtained his Master degree. Since his return to his country he has been working as a specialist in social help at the Kuwait University. He is currently the head of the Kuwait Literary Society.

He is the author of the following books: *Ta'luq nuqṭa tasquṭ... ṭaq* (1983), *Irāda al-ma'būd fī ḥāl Abī Ġāsim fī ād-daḥl al-maḥdūd* (1989), as well as a collection of stories published after the Gulf War in 1992 entitled: *Talqa fī Ṣadri āš-šimāl*. Furthermore, in 1989 he published a novel *Badrīya*.

In this article I analyse his first collection of stories of 1983, entitled *Ta'luq nuqṭa tasquṭ... ṭaq*. One is immediately struck, even from a casual reading, by the author's incisive descriptions and singular talent for observation, as well as his passion for writing about reality as it actually is, without embellishment. At the

same time his stories always make compelling reading, often having interesting characters and exciting themes and events. These themes usually revolve around typical problems of everyday Arab life. The past, tradition and so forth, are not so significant in those stories, although new changes do not always mean more cause for hope. Materialism has not changed society yet: there are individuals who endeavour to find their Arab identity in the modern world.

The first story *Tawāṣul* is about childhood, and the way it forms our view of "life's next phase". Childhood is seen as being difficult for everybody, but at the same time it awakens our consciousness of the real world. The author begins the first part in his characteristic style whereby every constituent part of a given story forms a whole picture: a picture of playing children who are busy observing the world in their own way. Childhood has no responsibilities: the children's world consists solely of their toys and games. The next part shows us two adults who are still young at heart. Their thoughts return to sandy beaches and play, but at the same time they have themselves become conscious of their identity in a new environment: the real world. The cruel realities of modern life — such as the absent father who abandoned 'Abd Allāh, and his mother, in early childhood to allegedly buy him the "legendary red bicycle", are somewhat lessened by the growing friendship between two children. Soon they search for a common denominator that would bring them together, despite all their differences. 'Abd Allāh recalls the day when he summoned up the courage to bring a dog into the house, which then made him in 'Āliya's eyes somebody worthy of her friendship.

The story *Al-furṣa-āl-ūlā... aḥīra* is about a hero whose life is totally dominated by the hardship and evil of his poorly paid work. The oppressive conditions far exceed the limits of endurance of even the toughest workers. The misery and oppressiveness of the work is so overpowering and so far removed from reality that normal human affairs merely become a figment of his imagination. There is an undoubtedly sarcastic side of the story as the hero works in a pornographic cinema, endlessly cleaning it up just to make enough money to support himself. Then, in a critical moment, he realizes the irony of the fact that he has never seen a naked woman. He reminds himself that having a wife/woman is an everyday human condition which could be his own also. He ends up spending some of his hardly earned money to see the films in the cinema. He has no chance of changing his job. He can't allow himself a peek at one of the pornographic films and see a naked woman for the first time. Whenever one of the pornographic films is being screened, he is far too exhausted to stay awake physically during the performance. The cruel of that life leaves him no other alternative way out of living.

The story *Nuḡūm aqall... nuḡūm aḫṭar* astounds the reader by its concise form. It comprises three parts, each one consisting of dialogues between two army officers of differing ranks. The middle part is characterised by a terse speech, full of insinuations, which the lower ranked officer uses when addressing his fiancée. The

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story could well be a portrait of the author himself taken from some obviously real life situations, which he must be only too familiar with professional work affecting his private life, the illusion of justice and kindness, the fear and the inability to defend himself in front of officers of higher rank. Influence and status alone are powerful enough to dictate other people's lives.

The story entitled *Wa-āl-insān lā yasmun* has a similar theme: it concerns a man who is in danger of losing his worthless job. His health is deteriorating and, in addition, he is constantly weighed down by his demanding wife. Moreover, he becomes increasingly depressed at the derision he suffers from his close friend. The subject of the work constantly repeats itself as if in a film frame — in this case the work consists in selling newspapers on the street. One can make an analogy between a musical chorus line, which is constantly repeated in a piece of music, and the hero's internal struggle with himself, which comes out as monologue. The story sends a very gloomy message about everyday human situations: possibly the author wishes to emphasize that the only way to accurately describe them is to do so without embellishment and without recourse to euphemisms.

*Al-lu'ba* is written in a very open-ended, ambiguous way: the reader is left to form his own conclusions about the story, which involves criminal action. For example, we don't know whether the two antagonists are really genuinely fighting with each other or just playing: the reader must decide for himself. The plot unfolds slowly, comprising increasingly more intense attacks and counter-attacks. The culminating point of the story suggests that the two antagonists are in actual fact brothers.

*Mā zāla āl-ġihāz yadūr* is another composition of fully continued sections: each dialogue represents the next stage in the action. It concerns married life and courtship and is written as an integral whole. The husband falls into a jealous rage on discovering that his wife had been unfaithful. Finally, his hatred extends to the tape-recorder itself, from which he firstly obtained the proof of his wife's betrayal.

Most of the action in *Aḍ-Ḍarība* occurs in the dialogue. Again the work is written in integral sections and again the central theme relates to life without adequate means of support as a source of further complications. A happy married couple, undergoes a crisis of separation as a result of the impossibility of being free to express their true feelings. The hero's mother hidden drama is that she does everything she can to avoid hurting the feelings of her two sons and a single daughter in the face of the threat posed by the two male lodgers she has to keep in order to pay rent. Out of desperation, her husband Maḥmūd, an assistant surgeon, takes to secretly administering sleeping powders to children, so he can be free to make love with his wife. The whole situation is utterly degrading. Walīd's pessimism is only too apparent in this case. Surely this is a confirmation of the author's passionate beliefs: he could not have written such a disturbing work, and in such vivid detail, in any other case.

In contrast to many of the previous stories, the story *Al-Hadar* consists of disconnected parts: each part having no relation to any other. The whole action is set in a café. Each separate part concentrates on the dialogues held around every separate table. The reader finds out about Šāliḥ, who earned his wealth abroad, and to whom all doors are opened, albeit not always without some difficulty. On tying the conjugal knot he takes on family responsibilities. Although his background is a subject of insinuations from certain family members, he finds his place in the society thanks to his continuously increasing wealth. The insinuations reveal that there is a dark side of Šāliḥ, which awakens on a boat where Šāliḥ comes to doubt his wife's faithfulness. The end of the story comes when everybody in the café hears the call to the mosque. At that instant, the difference between a good man and a bad man, a rich and a poor one, becomes insignificant.

*Tumma yuqtal ba'dahā* is of a totally different nature to the stories we have considered. It does not concern any particularly deep social issues. It's all about saving the life of a dog, called Sanqūr. The action is rather straight forward, so it's hardly surprising that the author concentrates on typical canine escapades that Sanqūr gets himself into whenever he runs away: a frequent occurrence. What strikes the reader uppermost is the trouble and care the owner takes in looking after Sanqūr. One can say "effort binds them together". The narrative is neither based in favour of the owner nor of the dog. Moreover, it is very realistically written.

*Man afraḡ qa', al-ḡasad al-ma'rūq min al-milḥ?* relates the story of a mysterious death of one of the factory workers, who happens to be the best friend of the hero of the work sharing the same fate — unbearably hard and cruel labour. This labour turns into an uncontrollable obsession for the hero, work — from dawn till dusk, abysmally poorly paid, exploitative and leaving no opportunity for changing it — and ultimately dangerous to the extent of loss of life. His style allows him to achieve moderation. This is necessary to ensure that the reader's attention be concentrated on the drama itself and be not diverted away by more grizzly, but irrelevant, details of the story. One of the critical scenes is when the hero confronts the director and many of the threads of the later plots are firstly introduced. Many of the parts are similar to each other and the same expressions and phrases are used again and again. The story can be interpreted in various ways, it is full of insinuations, and focusses one's attention on symbols. It is owing to this concise form that the author manages simultaneously to write expressively about the drama and tragedy of the story, as well as describe each successive phase in the life of the hero. The hero comes to identify his life, and that of his rebellious and ill-fated friend, with that of a simple earthworm aimlessly worming his way through the ground. To say that: "man is a worm" is an insinuation that attempts at emphasizing the author's sense of pessimism. Walīd spares nothing and nobody in his story: neither the hero, his aims, the cruel director, the nature nor the life itself. Everything is presented in vivid and painful details. Nothing

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is left out. Pessimism pervades throughout, with a possible exception of the human psyche which is witness to everything. It is appealed to see, to endure... or maybe even to die.

*Burḡā* is written as a monologue and tells of a beautiful woman whose husband does not take proper care of her. Just as in many other stories of this kind, the general speech is sneering, mocking and cruel. The women in Walīd's stories are just the same as everything else in the surrounding cruel world: incapable of understanding, ruthless and demanding. Meanwhile the men are seen as being helpless by virtue of the mercilessly oppressive work they do. They are seen as being mere instruments of fate, a fate they no longer challenge.

The two stories entitled *Ta'luq nuqṭa* and *Tasquṭ...ṭaq* are in some sense complementary. The first of them describes an illegal, nocturnal voyage to Kuwait being in the eyes of the central characters a magical land where all their dreams of wealthy life will come true. The heroes of the story are the immigrants-to-be passengers on the ship. The focus of attention falls on two of them: two friends, Muṣṭafā and Ḥusayn. Muṣṭafā, although worried about his son and his daughter he has left behind with intention to return to them after having acquired the wealth abroad, is well suited to the illegal voyage. However, as the dialogue shows, he is not exactly sure what he has got himself into, even though he wanted this chance more than anything else. His gloomy and sad thoughts create a singular atmosphere of sadness. The conclusion of the story is full of surprises and tension at the successful and safe landing at the bank.

*Tasquṭ...ṭaq* is a sequel of *Ta'luq nuqṭa* and follows Muṣṭafā's adventures after his "salvation". It divides into two parts, the first takes place in a worker's hostel where Muṣṭafā is in hiding until he obtains his visa, for which he has paid an exorbitant amount of money. His hopes rise and fall while waiting: he gave away his money without any guarantees. After several weeks he breaks down and in his despair he runs away into the street. The mood is ambiguous. Violence, theft, and the consequent arrest, are left as possible alternatives. In his desolation Muṣṭafā rests himself on a future with no visa that condemns him to a degrading work which brings him no money in pocket; neither does it guarantee him a chance to go back home to his beloved children.

In Walīd ar-Ruḡayyib's stories striking is his unique and penetrating power of description. The author is an accurate recorder of all possible social dilemmas that surround him. He never embroiders the truth. He avoids the temptation of leaving the reader with a solution to the dilemmas he addresses. He portrays the man as a powerless being when confronted with his own psyche, his surroundings and his uncomprising living conditions. The central characters of his stories are used as a mean of presenting social issues. He identifies himself with those most vulnerable people who cannot face the problems and pressures set before them. Through his passionate conviction Walīd ar-Ruḡayyib portrays the truth and harsh realities of life.