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The Palestinian Novel – Genesis and Dilemma

The development of the novel in Palestine is similar to the evolution of the novel in other Arab countries. The difficult and raging history of the nation had an essential influence on its literary heritage, giving it specific character.

Let's recollect, that the Palestinian tragedy began from the moment, when the Zionist movement planned the construction of a Jewish state in the Palestinian territory, which after the decline of the Ottoman Empire existed as a British protectorate. Great Britain promised the Jews the construction of their own country, which had received the name: *Wa'd Balfūr* (Balfour's Promise)¹. The British Government permitted hundreds of thousands of Jews to immigrate to Palestine. In the Palestinian press publications appeared calling attention to imminent danger. The attempts to restrict the Jewish influence were undertaken increasing day to day. There were actions directed at an interdiction of land sale to the Jews. Manifestations, strikes and armed counteractions were carried out against the Englishmen and Zionist terrorist groups.

At this time national-revolutionary literature began to be formed. The poetry was to raise enthusiasm and national feelings in Palestinians. Therefore, the domination of the poetic form caused that only a few writers continued to write in prose. The Kuwaiti writer 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Ġarballī even has wrote, that "the Palestinian writers were not interested in the process of creation, except *for even thought there were* high educated people in Palestine, and also that Palestine had many writers"². Also it is confirmed by the statement of Iṣḥāq Ġār Allāh: "Palestine was and till now is in danger, in danger of its existence as an Arabic country. Besides that this theme is a wide field for literature, for kindling enthusiasm between broad masses, nobody thought of literary activity then, when others were involved in bloody struggle. The events called more on the will of speech than on

¹ Arthur James Balfour (1848–1930) – head of the board of Conservative party; 1902–1906 – vice-minister, then minister of foreign affairs of Great Britain; author of declaration of 1917 about foundation of Israel State in Palestine. See: A. Bukowska, *Palestyńczycy. Życie i walka*, Warsaw 1978.

² 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Ġarballī, *Udabā' Filasṭīn lam yahtammū bi-šu'ūn at-ta'līf*, in: "Al-Adīb", Beirut, vol. 12, December 1944.

writing the stories"³. In the same article, Ishāq Ğār Allāh also says that strong English censorship and state control over the printed editions limited the development of literature.

Due to the activity of the Palestine-Russian Friendship Club (Al-Ġam'īyya al-Filasṭīniyya Ar-Rūsiyya), which arose in 1882, Arabs from Syria and Palestine could familiarize themselves with Russian literature. At this time, some European literature was translated into Arabic; most of all Russian and French literature. The name of Ḥalīl Baydas who had translated some novels of Aleksandr Pushkin, Nikolai Gogol, Aleksey Tolstoy and some stories of Anton Chekhov became known. From French literature, some products of Victor Hugo were translated. Rūḥī al-Ḥālīdī played an essential role in opening the windows on the works of Victor Hugo.

The set of the translated prose has affected the development of publishing in Palestine – the literature of this country. In due course, some publications in the press began to take the form of brief stories. The most known writers of that time were Ḥalīl Baydas, Ḥalīl as-Sakākīnī, 'Īsā al-'Īsā i Būlus Šiḥāda.

Ḥalīl Baydas headed the school of long stories and around him the set of his followers gathered, such as Anṭūn Ballān, Ġubrān Maṭar, Kulṭūm 'Awda, Fāris Muẓaffar, Ibrāhīm Hanna, who had translated and written stories in his publication⁴. This publication had the name of An-Nafā'is ("Distinctions"), and was founded in November, 1908. Its contents consisted of translations of stories and original pieces. In due course, the name of the edition was changed to *An-Nafā'is al-'Aṣriyya* ("Modern Distinctions"). In the introduction to the first number, Baydas stated an opinion about the novel and its role in the society. He wrote: "It is difficult to hide that the novel, some are of the opinion, had a huge influence on the hearts and minds of the people it is considered, that it is one of the strongest factors of the mankind's stimulation, based on the reason of the people, doctrines and legends, extending to all that is most valuable for culturing of the people and enlightenment of the mind"⁵.

In the introduction to an extensive edition of the stories under the title *Masāriḥ al-adhān* ("Theatres of Minds"), Ḥalīl Baydas has explained his own understanding of the novel "The novel aspires to glorify the good acts and condemn the bad ones, to formatter high morals, to enlightenment of the reason and to clean the heart, and also to call for positive acts"⁶. The prose writer should "scoop subjects for his the novels from real vital events, based on the truthful nature of man and reality. Describing various emotions he owes to ennoble the soul and mentality as well as the depths of the heart"⁷. He pays attention at is necessary "to write for the people, as the people create the glory

³ Ishāq Ğār Allāh, *Da'ālat al-intāğ al-adabī fī Filasṭīn*, in: "Al-Adīb", Beirut, vol. 1, January 1945.

⁴ See: Abd ar-Raḥmān Yāğī, *Al-Adab al-filasṭīnī al-ḥadīṭ*. Dār al-Kātib al-'Arabī, Beirut, 1969, p. 82.

⁵ Nāṣir ad-Dīn al-Asad, *Muḥāḍarāt 'an Ḥalīl Baydas rā'id al-qisṣa al-'arabiyya fī Filasṭīn*, Cairo, 1963, p. 45.

⁶ Ḥalīl Baydas, *Masāriḥ al-adhān*, Al-Maṭba'a Al-'Aṣriyya, Cairo, 1924, p. 11.

⁷ Ibid., p. 12.

of each nation”⁸. He encourages other authors to pay greater attention to the artistic side of the novel, as without this, any product is an “unnecessary creation”⁹.

One of the most important subjects of that time was a comparison of the Western and Eastern Worlds, a definition of the differences and common features. After the Ḥalīl as-Sakākīnī literary school was formed, it generalized the belief about the occurrence of new literary forms, their development and rights of their management. It approved “the withdrawal from fiction, to the reality, and mutual penetration of feelings and mind”¹⁰. In the book *Muṭāla‘āt fī al-luġa wa-al-adab* (“Readings on Language and Literature”), Ḥalīl as-Sakākīnī tried to present the stages of development of the literature and to convince others of the necessity to replace ancient literary forms with new ones.

It is possible to say that the Palestinian novel grew on a base of close contacts with the culture of neighbouring peoples, and especially with Egypt, Syria and Lebanon. There is nothing strange that these states stay close together not only in geographical situation, but also in cultural and public relations.

Nāṣir ad-Dīn al-Asad specifies three factors, which defined formation of the Palestinian novel. There are:

- Press and cultural editions from Lebanon and Egypt of the last quarter of the XIX century, for example: “Al-Muqtaṭaf”, “Al-Laṭā’if”, “Al-Hilāl”, “Al-Mašriq”, “Al-Ahrām”;
- Contact with Western culture through the intermediary of the Turkish language, which many famous products were translated into;
- Direct contact with European culture, mainly with England, France and Russia through missionary schools in many Palestinian cities, which were based in the first half of the XIX century¹¹.

It is assumed, that Ḥalīl Baydas wrote the first Palestinian novel, issued it in 1920 under the title *Al-Wārīt* (“The Heir”). It was his only narrative product. Some critics consider that the Palestinian novel had appeared much earlier thanks to Aḥmad at-Taṣmīmī from Hebron, who – on ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān Yā ġī’s consideration – “was the first founder of the novel in the Arabic language; under the title *Umm Ḥakīm* (“Hakim’s Mother”). This story was lost, so we can’t understand it’s essence or estimate its literary value”¹².

The heroes of the novel *Al-Wārīt* (“The Heir”) are not Palestinians, and it’s action doesn’t occur in the territory of Palestine. Fārūq Wādī explains, that this product was not in reaction to the historical duty to oppose to colonial-Zionistic plans, it didn’t desire the treachery of the Motherland. This neutral product maintained a distance from the

⁸ Ibid., p. 12.

⁹ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁰ ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān Yā ġī, *Al-Adab...*, op. cit., p. 61.

¹¹ Nāṣir ad-Dīn al-Asad, *Muḥāḍarāt*, op. cit., pp. 11–14.

¹² ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān Yā ġī, *Ḥayāt al-adab al-filasṭīnī al-ḥadīṡ min awwal an-nahḍa ḥattā an-nakba*, Beirut 1968, p. 437.

realities of life. The critic doesn't reduce the importance of the given novel asserting, that: "There isn't anything, which connects it to concrete reality, specifying approaching danger aside from limited historical contents"¹³.

In the 20s or 30s of the XX century, the quantity of Palestinian novels was small and it is easy to list their most important positions. They are: *Zulm al-wālidayn* ("Parental Clearing") by Yūḥannā D a k a r t and his second, but unpublished novel *Aṣl aš-šaqa'* ("Root of Misfortune")¹⁴, then *Al-Ḥayāt ba'da al-mawt* ("Life After Death") under authorship of Iskandar al-Ḥūrī al-Bayt ġ ā l ī, which tells about tragedies of the First World War; two novels by Ġamīl al-Baḥrī: *Al-Aṣā'il wa-al-aṣḥār* ("Rise up and down") and *Afrāḥ arabī* ("Pleasures of the Spring") – compositions, distinguished by the form, and putting upon the reader unknown and sensational contents. Still it is possible to mention the novel *Al-Mallāk wa-as-simsār* ("Owner and Intermediary") by Muḥammad 'Izza Darwaza (1934), which told about compulsion exerted on the Palestinian land owners to sale their ground to the Jews. Other products are: the novel of Anwar 'Amr 'Arafāt under the title: *Wa-lakum fī al-qaṣāṣ ḥayāt* ("Have life on account") from 1934 and the novel of Ġibrā'il Abū Sa'dī: *Laysa anta?* ("It is not you?") from 1939, concerning religious activity, showing ambitions of youth and its aspiration to lofty ideals.

In the forties of the XX century, the Palestinian novel received all the attributes of a literary product; in 1943 the novel of Ishāq Mūsā al-Ḥusaynī under the title *Mudakkirāt daġāġa* ("The Memoirs of a Hen") was published in Cairo. The well-known Ṭāha Ḥusayn wrote the foreword. This product enjoyed huge popularity and consequently was twice republished. In a questionnaire of the publishing house Dār Al-Ma'ārif, which was carried out between the Arabic readers, the best book of all books issued in a series "Read" (*Silsilat Iqrā'*) elected this novel in Cairo. This work tells about a reasonable Palestinian hen. Ṭāha Ḥusayn wrote about it what follows: "She is similar to each Arab, either from Palestine or another Arabic country, who searches for the truth in international and public validity, and also in an Arabic idea, which is the basis for the new force of the old ideology – constructed on the eminence of good and the aspiration to lofty ideals"¹⁵.

The hen tells about the events of life, recollects, when she was touched by problems: her henhouse made strong enemies; they abducted some of her girlfriends. But this was not the end of the problems, because other hens started to grasp the henhouse. The young hens tried to battle against the enemies, but the Reasonable hen forbade them to because of a discrepancy of forces. She is hidden for utopian ideas: "you owe – she offers them – to go all over the world and to proclaim to the people that they would accept and ennoble only truth, to convince the tyrants that their violence will turn against them. Only

¹³ Fārūq Wādī, *Talāt 'alāmāt fī ar-riwāya al-filasṭīniyya: Ġassān Kanafānī, Imīl Ḥabībī, Ġabrā Ibrāhīm Ġabrā*, Al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya li-ad-Dirāsāt wa-an-Našr, Beirut 1981, p. 23.

¹⁴ See: Aḥmad Abū Maṭar, *Ar-Riwāya fī al-adab al-filasṭīnī 1950–1975*, Al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya li-ad-Dirāsāt wa-an-Našr, Beirut 1980.

¹⁵ Ṭāha Ḥusayn, *An introduction to the novel of Ishāq Mūsā al-Ḥusaynī, Mudakkirāt daġāġa*, Silsilat Iqrā', Maktabat al-Ma'ārif, Cairo 1943, pp. 6–7.

in such cases you will prove to them that your problems are their too”¹⁶. Further the Hen says: “Travelling the Earth, you have to distribute maximum ideals among the people, based on good, and then, certainly, that we shall meet again in our henhouse, the entire world, not only ours, will be cleared by us of the dust and dirt”¹⁷.

These words are a reflection of the validity of the author and his conception on resistance and struggle. The utopia that was offered by the novel is the refusal of the real struggle for maximum ideals and offering the illusion of moral philosophy, with the purpose of victory over the more powerful forces. Finally, it conducted to distance itself from the true Palestinian interests.

By its artistic character, the novel *Mudakkirāt dağāğa* is traditional in the performance of Arabic literature. The book *Kalīla wa-Dimna* (“Kalila and Dimna”) is written in the same style. Here, animals talk as the people too, identifying what is kind and angry in various vital situations.

In 1946, a novel of Muḥammad al-‘Adnānī under the title *Fī as-sarīr* (“In the bed”) appeared. The writer related in it his illness. This novel didn’t leave the framework of documentary literature, but nevertheless became an important literary work.

The novel of Iskandar al-Ḥūrī al-Baytğālī under the title *Fī aṣ-ṣamīm* (“In the Heart”) from the 1947 tells about problems of a certain aristocrat with a prostitute. The young man protests against customs existing in the Arabic environment. According to the writer, this novel is “the textbook concerning life the youth and sexual attitudes, expressed in a narrative form”¹⁸. That year the novel *Muraqqiṣ al-‘umyān* (“Leader of the Blinded”) by ‘Ārif al-‘Ārif was issued. Its hero is blind, and he exceeds another people by patience, belief and the skill to win over difficulties and finding one’s own place in the surroundings of the world. This product is of a psychological theme. It does not correspond to the political and public difficulties of the Palestine life.

To generalize, all novels of that period didn’t display the drama of the Palestinian public. They did not show the tragedy of the events and problems, which the Palestine people confronted. Also, they did not represent those negative moments, when the people were very limited in reception of solutions. Products of the forties (and also about their authors) were far from essential Palestinian problems. It was the literature of intelligence isolated from the people’s needs in a word alienated. Intelligence was not able to express events in the proper form, new to the novel.

Some sources give information on two works meaningful from the point of view concerning two subjects of conformity. It is the novels of Ġamāl al-Ḥusaynī under the titles: *‘Alā sikkat Al-Ḥiğāz* (“On Ways to Al-Hijaz”) and *Turayyā* (“Thurayya”). Unfortunately, both were lost, and there is no opportunity to appreciate them. Proceeding from the statement of Ibrāhīm ‘Abd as-Sattār, which is placed in the article *Lamḥa ‘an udabā’ Filastīn* (“Sketch of the Palestinian Writers”) the novel *‘Alā sikkat Al-Ḥiğāz* (“On Ways to

¹⁶ Ishāq Mūsā al-Ḥusaynī, *Mudakkirāt dağāğa*, Silsilat Iqra’, Maktabat Al-Ma‘ārif, Cairo 1943, p. 153.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 157.

¹⁸ Aḥmad Abū Matar, *Ar-Riwāya fī...*, op. cit., p. 43.

Al-Hijaz") was known, that: "it is the tragic history about the deportation of an Arabic village from northern regions of Palestine. Life of the Palestine families, their efforts, moral and spiritual problems were shown. The patriotism of the Palestinian youth and motivation of dedication for the Motherland was given"¹⁹. Also, Fārūq Wādī had recollected that those two novels could be something special in the history of the Palestinian literature of that time. The memoirs on them leave the impression that "they did not depart and did not become the treachery of the Palestinian people's activity; they were in close contact to it and displayed its problems"²⁰.

The novels of Ġabrā Ibrāhīm Ġabrā had a huge influence on Palestinian prose. One of them is *Ṣurāḥ fī layl ṭawīl* ("The Scream of a Long Night"), written in English in 1946, translated into Arabic by Ġabrā himself and published ten years later. This product tells about the decline of the aristocratic class, after independence of the country from Turkish occupation. It represents a high artistic level, precursing the arrival of the talented writer, which during the next several years played a huge role in the perfection of prose in Palestine and in the Arabic world.

As told before, the Palestinian novel, before 1948, was at a rather low level. The basis of the publishing issues consisted of poetry, and it occupied a major place in the literature. Certainly, the poetry irrefutably executed hopes fixed on them. Revolution lyrics, which lifted spirit in the resistance movement, appeared quickly enough. The prose remained far behind poetry in relation to the performance of the national ideas.

In 1952 the novel under the title *Lāġi'a* ("Refugee") was written by Ġūrġ Ḥannā in Lebanon. It was the first product of the type. Such products received the name *adab an-nakba* ("the literature of Disaster"). In spite of that it was written by the Lebanese novelist Ġūrġ Ḥannā, devoted to the tragedy of the Palestinian people in 1948. This story was the first 'non-Palestinian' literary work, which relates the problems of Palestine²¹. Further, the set of products was devoted to this subject, but "in most cases, the novels did not contain mature or convincing methods and forms, they were only attempts at sentimental sympathy and expression of kindness"²².

As the novel was based on literary activity of the time, it is simple to list most of titles: *Al-Firdaws as-salīb* ("Plundered Paradise") and *Qalb wa-ḍamīr* ("Heart and conscience") by Samīr Quṭb, *Anāṣir haddāma* ("Destruction Factors") by Yūsuf al-Ḥaṭīb, *Ṣaqā' ilā al-abad*, ("Eternal Patience") by 'Awnī Muṣṭafā, *Al-Kanza al-ḥaḍrā'* ("Green shirt") by Muḥammad al-Qawāsima, *Aqwā min al-ġallādīn* ("Stronger than the Tyrants") by Raġab al-Talātīnī, *Ḥabbat al-burtuqāl* ("Fruit of an orange") and *Ḥafnat rimāl* ("A Fist of sand") by Nāṣir ad-Dīn an-Naṣāṣībī.

¹⁹ Ibrāhīm 'Abd as-Sattār, *Lamḥa 'an udabā' Filasṭīn*, "Al-Adīb", Beirut, vol. 9, September 1944.

²⁰ Fārūq Wādī, *Ṭalāt 'alāmāt...*, op. cit., pp. 32-33.

²¹ See: Fāḍil 'Abbās Ḥādī, *Qaḍīyyat Filasṭīn wa-ar-riwāya al-'arabiyya al-mu'āṣira*, in: "Šu'ūn Filasṭīniyya", vol. 11 (July 1972), pp. 72-78.

²² See: Šālīḥ Abū Iṣba', *Filasṭīn fī ar-riwāya al-'arabiyya*, Markaz al-Abḥāt - M.T.F., Beirut 1975, p. 20.

Two writers deserve special attention, they debuted with in mature products, but their talent, blossomed later. They were: Tawfiq Fayyāḍ, author of the novel *Al-Muṣawwahūn* (“Marking by scars”) and Nawwāf Abū al-Hayḡā’, author of the novel *Aṭ-Ṭarīd* (“Expeller”).

Analyzing the prose of the period 1948–1967, it is easy to notice its weak sides. The main reason of these defects was that the artistic and humanitarian elements of these products were based on nationalism, unnatural enthusiasm and propaganda. The literary critic Na‘īm al-Yāfī wrote: “by character they recalled more speeches, rather than stories. Their contents did not suffice on the artistic side. The authors focused large attention on political events, bypassing events of Palestinian life in the new situation. The products of this time were displayed by actual facts, instead of stories. The problems, represented in them, considered superficially without careful study of events”²³.

As to the creation of literary images, the writer represented an image of the homeless. It was the man without means to exist represented in a rather artificial way. Such heroes were artificial and unable to act.

In time, the Palestinian novel slowly began to appear. Concerning the description of the tragic facts it used more mature ways of expression. It was natural that the literature reflecting interests of the oppressed people appeared. In 1948–1967 the attempt to create a Palestinian novel centered on Ġassān Kanafānī, who wrote the novels: *Riḡāl fī aš-šams* (“Men in the Sun”) and *Mā tabaqqā lakum* (“What remains for you”). About these novels Fārūq Wādī wrote: “Authentic creation of such novels had enabled to reflect the environmental validity on a high artistic level. The dialectic interaction of both these factors permitted to write the novels on a high artistic level (...) Kanafānī first achieved such purpose in the novel *Riḡāl fī aš-šams*, in which he presented artistic, political and ideological views. The sense, submitted in the text, is reflection of his belief”²⁴.

In 1967 there was a so-called *an-naksa* (“the setback”). The Arabs lost for the second time, and Palestine appeared completely under occupation of Israel. In reply to this incident, the *adab an-naksa* (“Literature of the Setback”) appeared – the literature was captured by a creative powerlessness. Political incidents put a strong impact on literary activity. A similar situation had already been observed in 1948. Such a dire situation hadn’t existed for a long period. The writers realized the duty and undertook the responsibility for the representation of reality. They reflected new political trends connected with socialist ideas.

In the same time as Ġassān Kanafānī other names have appeared. The question is of Imīl Ḥabībī, who wrote two highly appreciated novels: *Sudāsiyyat al-ayyām as-sitta* (“Sextet on the Six Days”) and *Al-Waqāi’ al-ḡarība fī ihtifā’ Sa’id Abī an-Naḥs al-Mutašā’il* (“The secret life of Saed, the ill-fated pessoptimist”). They are considered as one of major achievements of Palestinian prose up to the present day. The Palestinian and Arabic

²³ Na‘īm Ḥasan al-Yāfī, *Al-Qiṣṣa al-qaṣīra fī Filasṭīn*, in: “Al-Adīb”, Beirut, vol. 9, 1965.

²⁴ Fārūq Wādī, *Ṭalāt ‘alāmāt...*, op. cit., p. 36.

literature essentials reached on Ġabrā Ibrāhīm Ġabrā by a set of novels. His outstanding products are: *As-Safīna* ("The Ship") and *Al-Baḥt 'an Walīd Mas'ūd* ("In search of Walid Masud").

A special attention between deserve no doubt three Palestinian novel writers: Ġassān Kanafānī, Ġabrā Ibrāhīm Ġabrā and Imīl Ḥabībī. Kanafānī certainly achieved very much during his short life. His products have put a dominant mark on the literature till 1967. He replaced the image of the weak Palestinian receding to a strong battling soldier. He showed the development of national consciousness and the honour of battle for the return of the Motherland. Creative experiments and universal search shown by Ġassān Kanafānī introduced the new literary technique of writing into Arabic literature. It means a symbiosis of literary achievement of western writers and Arabic mentality. It is necessary to mention here the statements of the well-known Egyptian writer Yūsuf Idrīs: "The genius of Ġassān is incorporated in his fidelity to the Palestinian achievement and Arabian understanding of correctness. All his products were written without recurrence, though the whole time they concerned only one subject – Palestine"²⁵. In the prose form Ġassān Kanafānī displayed ideas of millions Palestinians, which had to live in exile. An image of these refugees, their tragic destiny, patience, and the hopes would be not complete without his works.

Without Ġassān Kanafānī, Ġabrā Ibrāhīm Ġabrā and Imīl Ḥabībī it would be hard to imagine such large progress in the Palestinian novel.

²⁵ Yūsuf Idrīs, *Ḥīna tastaḥid ayḍan al-kalimāt...*, in: Ġassān Kanafānī, *Al-Ātār al-kāmila*, (*Al-Qiṣaṣ al-qaṣīra*), Mu'assasat Ġassān Kanafānī at-Taḳāfiyya, Dār at-Ṭalī'a, Beirut 1980 (second edition), pp. 24–25.