

The Voice of an Asian Expat in a Qatari Short Story by Nurah Al-Saad: *The Newspaper Seller*

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Abstract:

Qatari literature is still budding, as its diffusion can be credited to the birth of the press in the 1960s, and it is yet to have garnered the attention of Western scholars, especially if compared to the literature from Arabian Persian Gulf countries, such as Kuwait, Oman and Saudi Arabia.

This study aims at contributing to enrich the discourse on Qatari literature, by analysing the structure and contents of the short story *The Newspaper Seller*, published in 1989 by Nurah al-Saad (Nūrah ʿāl Saʿad). This piece offers the reader a precious insight about the reality of expats' lives in the 1980s. The story depicts the harsh daily routine of an Asian immigrant, who attempts to survive by selling newspapers under the scorching sun in the streets of Doha. The main character, named Malik (Mālik), has just moved away from his family and is now dreaming of a better future, while finding himself in an entirely different reality: he is forced to work two jobs, in order to be able to live with some dignity and to help his family of origin.

This short story was highly acclaimed by literary critics. Due to its original topic and narrative techniques, through the use of interior monologue, associations, stream of consciousness and symbols, it is considered a pioneering work for that time.

Key Words: Qatari literature, Qatari Short Story, Women Writers, Gulf Literature, Nurah al-Saad.

Introduction:

Like most Gulf countries from the 1950s onwards, revenues from the oil industry rapidly contributed to the growth of the local economic prosperity, fostering the country's urbanisation process and the establishment of many educational and cultural institutions (Montigny-Kozłowska 1982, 475–476). Furthermore, the 1960s witnessed the rise of Qatari press¹, which represented a

¹ It is worth mentioning some of the most important Qatari journals and newspapers of 1960s and

turning point for the emerging local literature in its earliest form: the short story genre. The various stories were sent to the local newspaper by Qatari writers, who depicted and recorded the changes they had been observing within society. They especially focused on the conflicting gap between tradition and modern transformations, as portrayed in one of the earliest collections on this topic: *Bint al-ḥalīġ* (The Daughter of the Gulf), by Yusef al-Na‘mah (Yūsuf al-Na‘mah), editor-in-chief of *al-ʿUrūbah* during that time (Saleem 2017, 384).

However, starting from the mid-1970s, the evolution of the short story genre in Qatar begins to take on romantic tendencies, particularly thanks to the contributions of Qatari female writers, such as Kaltham Jabr (Kaṭṭam Ğabr), Umm Aktham (ʿUmm Akṭam), Hassa al-Jabr (Haṣṣah al-Ğabr), Maitha al-Khalifi (Maysah al-Ḥalīfi) and Nurah al-Saad (Nūrah ʿāl Saʿad).² The main issues, brought to the fore during this phase, mainly concern the role of women within the Arab community. The topic of marriage here represents a means to explore and reflect on the relationship between men and women (Fahmi 1983, 7–11). To this purpose, it is worth mentioning the first collection of short stories by Kaltham Jabr *Anta wa-ġābat aṣ-ṣamt wa-at-taraddud* (You and the Jungle of Silence and Hesitation), published in 1978.

Later on, during the 1980s, the Qatari short story reaches a certain technical maturity and starts to tend towards realism. It is now characterised by a consideration for psychological aspects and for the inner workings of the characters' minds. All this is supported by a strong use of symbolism, such as metaphors, similes and the interior monologue, which serve the purpose to bring to light and expose local social issues. Therefore, the focus of this phase continues to be on the issues pertaining to women's position and role within the local community, and on the generational gap between past and present generations, in terms of standards and values. It is to be noted that similar subject matters are also present in the productions of Qatari male writers, such as Hasan Rashid (Ḥasan Rašīd), Nasir Salih al-Fadal (Nāṣir Ṣāliḥ al-Faḍālah), Jamal Fayez (Ġamāl Fāyiz). (al-Dweek 1989,148; al-Saad 2005, 45–46)

Most of the short stories written by Qatari women deal both with the status of the woman in the society and the relationship between her freedom and the cultural constraints applied by the local community, and the status of men. However, some short stories break out of this mold, as they deal with humanitarian issues such as migration, displacement and the resulting struggles and sufferings endured by those who live as foreigners in the Qatari environment and culture. A pioneering example on these issues, presented in the collection *The Newspaper Seller* (1989), by Nurah al-Saad, is the tale of an Asian worker and his hardships and attempts to survive by selling newspapers, after moving away from his family to a different country, in order to pursue a more peaceful and brighter future.

1970s: *al-Dawḥah*, *al-ʿUrūbah*, *al-ʿAhd*, *al-Faġr*, *al-Rāyah* (Michalak-Pikulska 2016, p. 12).

² Henceforth Nurah al-Saad.

Nurah al-Saad and the Unheard Voice of Malik:

Nurah al-Saad is known in the Gulf area for being one of the most prominent Qatari writers and critics. She got a Bachelor's degree in Education at the Department of Arabic Language of Qatar University in 1985, and a Master's degree in Arts at the Department of Arabic Language of the University of Jordan in 1992.

In 1989, Nurah al-Saad published her first collection of short stories, with the title of *Bāʿi al-ġarāʿid* (The Newspaper Seller). In the following years, more of her collections of articles and studies about literary criticism were published. Among those we can find *Wa-ṭawāṣaw bi-al-ḥaqq* (Recommend Truth), a collection of papers published in 2003, followed by *Ṭaġribiyyat ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Munīf fī mudun al-milḥ, dirāsah naqḍiyyah* (The Experience of Abd al-Rahman Munif in City of Salt, a Critical Study) and *Aṣwāt al-ṣamt: maqālāt fī al-qīṣṣah wa al-riwāyah al-qatariyyah* (The Voices of Silence: Essays on the Qatari Story and Novel), both published in 2005. In 2007 she released the literary criticism study *Al-šams fī ʿiṭrī: maqālāt fī al-šiʿr wa al-naqd* (The Sun After Me: Essays on Poetry and Criticism), and in 2011 her first novel appeared, called *Al-ʿArīḍah* (The Petition). In 2013 *Bārānūyā* (Paranoia), a new collection of seven short stories, was issued as well.

The collection of short stories *Bāʿi al-ġarāʿid* (The Newspaper Seller), by Nurah al-Saad, stands out for her time, alongside Kaltham Jabr's collection *Waġʿ imraʿah ʿarabiyyah* (The Pain of an Arab Woman) published in 1993 (al-Nadawi 2007, 54). The collection *The Newspaper Seller* (1989) includes the following seven short stories: *Bāʿi al-ġarāʿid* (The Newspaper Seller), *Al-mazraʿah al-kabīrah* (The Big Estate), *Zahrāt al-balūṣiyyah* (The Daisy's Flower), *Raġab al-šayyāl* (Rajab the Labourer), *Al-mūmyāʿ* (The Mummy), *Fī al-badʿ kān al-suqūṭ* (At the beginning, the fall), *Al-šitāʿ* (Winter). With its vast variety of topics and innovative narration techniques, this anthology represents a pivotal artistic and objective shift in the development of the short story genre in Qatar. It encompasses many substantial issues, such as the emerging conflict between younger and older generations, the juxtaposition between life's hard reality and one's musings and dreams, and the unfairness of the socio-economic gap between the rich and the poor, within Qatar's hierarchical society (al-Hirtani 2013, 277). The short story *The Newspaper Seller* (al-Saad 1989, 3–9), which gives the compendium its title, was enthusiastically acclaimed by literary critics.

The story is about a newspaper seller, who spends endless hours working hard under the burning sun and waiting for drivers in the city to stop by and purchase some newspapers from him. One day, at one o'clock in the afternoon, he manages to sell his first newspaper of the day, before any traffic dissipates quickly, as the heat in the streets becomes unbearable.

كان يجلس وحيداً في هذا الجحيم، وتمنى لو أن أحداً يمر الآن، تمنى لو.. لو يكون الآن هناك، هناك لكنه هنا وفي وسط ذلك النهار الساجي، والكرة الشمسية المصمتة، والشوارع

التي تسبح في الأشعة، كان « مالك » مع جرائده يبدوان كشيء زائد.³

He was standing alone in the middle of that burning hell, in hopes that someone would drive by. He wished he were somewhere else, but there he was, under the sun rays which bathed the streets on that flat day. Malik and his newspapers seemed to be out of place⁴.

The world around him looks like a mirage, the street is deserted, he would like to take a break and rest, but he cannot afford it. Malik keeps thinking about the ice that will refresh him and soothe him after the work.

هناك، وعلى بضع خطوات منه، جدار متهدم، له ظل صغير على الأرض ولكنه لم يكن ليستطيع الابتعاد عن الشارع، فربما أغراه الظل والجوع والتعب... فنعس، بينها الوقت يمضي وعمله الآخر ينتظره في بيت كفيله.⁵

A few steps from him, there was a ruined wall casting a little shade, but he couldn't get off the road. Perhaps because of that shadow, or the hunger, or the fatigue ... he fell asleep, and as time passed, his second job at his sponsor's house was still waiting for him.

Malik thinks of his life, and scenes from his past and present alternate: his mind goes back to his country of origin, where he didn't enjoy his life. He thinks about his family, he remembers the shared room where he used to live with other workers. He reflects about how hard he needs to work just to earn a few riyals, and about his side hustle as a servant, which he has to get to, after he finishes selling the newspapers.

وتذكر الحجرة التي تأويه، هو وثلاثة رجال آخرين من الشرق، في منطقة بعيدة عن الدوحة، هي في الأصل، مسكن شعبي قديم، مقطع إلى حجيرات صغيرة، واطئة السقف، معظمها بدون نوافذ، وليس فيها غير لمبة.⁶

He remembered the room where he used to live, shared with three more Orientals, in an area far from Doha. It was originally an old popular residence, which had been made into small rooms with low ceilings, most of which without windows, and only one lamp.

At one point, his stream of consciousness is interrupted by the arrival of a skinny, wounded dog being chased and thrown stones at by merciless children. Malik jumps into the dog's rescue, but the children will then target him, too. They start throwing rocks at him, and then they casually walk away.

وانتبه على صباح ولغظ بقربه، ورأى كلباً أريد، يهرول باعياء تجاهه، يتبعه ثلة من أطفال،

³ Nurah al-Saad, *Bā'i al-ġarā'id* (The Newspaper Seller), 1989, p.8.

⁴ All the passages taken from the story are translated from Arabic into English by the author of this article.

⁵ Nurah al-Saad, *Bā'i al-ġarā'id* (The Newspaper Seller), 1989, p.4.

⁶ Nurah al-Saad, *Bā'i al-ġarā'id* (The Newspaper Seller), 1989, p.4-5.

يرمونه بالحجارة، وقلوبهم خالية من الزلل والندامة، وكان الكلب يتعثر ثم ينهض بتثاقل،
يجر وراءه خيطاً ثخيناً من الدم.
وقام هو، ونهته الأطفال، هز بجمع كفه في وجوههم الساكنة، فأخذوا يرمونه بالحجارة ولما
نزف دمه عادوا من حيث أتوا في هدوء.⁷

He heard a noise nearby and saw a gray dog running weakly towards him. A group of children were chasing it mercilessly, hurling stones, while the dog struggled to get up on his legs, leaving a trail of blood behind it.

He stood up and threatened the children waving his fist in front of their expressionless faces, so they started throwing stones at him, too, and when he started to bleed, they quietly walked away, going back to where they came from.

The dog remains agonising on the ground. Finally, a car pulls over and the driver buys a couple of newspapers. Malik takes the money and points to the dog in an attempt to ask for help, but the man in the car spits up in the air, and a few drops hit Malik's face. Then he drives away.

ومد إليه يده، وبعد تردد، أشار إلى الكلب، ولمحه الرجل بعجل، ثم بصق في الهواء تطاير
الرزاذ على وجه بائع الجرائد، وقال الرجل:
- كلاب مشردة. كلاب.⁸

He held out his hand and, after a moment of hesitation, he pointed to the dog. The man looked at him quickly, then spat up into the air, and his saliva descended onto the newspaper seller's face. The man exclaimed:

- Stray dogs! Dogs!

The dog continues to fret, laying suffering on the asphalt, and Malik continues to look at him, aware that it would die of hunger and thirst, if left there. Then, he hoists the unsold newspapers on his shoulder and sets out to get to his other workplace.

The story is told in the third person narrator and it revolves around the character of Malik, the newspaper seller. As shown through the synopsis and the excerpts presented above, the story depicts the tragedy that underscores living in such harsh conditions, as the writer aims to highlight the social and humanitarian issues that come with the suffering of expatriate workers. The location where the story takes place is presumably a street in Doha, and while time moves through the technique of flashbacks, the arrangement of past and present times is coherent and it allows the reader to share Malik's pain (al-Hafiz et al. 2016, 148).

A novel conceived specifically for that time: the narrative techniques used by Nurah al-Saad offer a stylistic diversity which poignantly expresses the suffering of her characters, in the context of economic and social

⁷ Nurah al-Saad, *Bāʿi al-ġarāʿid* (The Newspaper Seller), 1989, p.6.

⁸ Nurah al-Saad, *Bāʿi al-ġarāʿid* (The Newspaper Seller), 1989, p.9.

transformations.

In this story, the dog is the one character that warrants special consideration. When the dog arrives at the scene, it is being chased by children, who are attacking it to the point of bleeding; so, Malik rushes to push them away, with the result of being assaulted, too. These children symbolise the loss of values that affects the new generations, as they behave with utter disregard and disrespect for life. Such an image reflects a concern shared by many Qatari writers about the posterity. Accordingly, as events escalate in the story, Malik's pain intensifies to mirror the pain of the wounded dog, as displayed by this excerpt:

وعند ذلك الحد، اختلجت الأفكار في صدره المحرور، وأخذ يدق رأسه بقبضته، وقربه كان الكلب يدك رأسه في الحصى المدبب بشراسة.⁹

At that point, his thoughts stirred in his furious chest and he began to punch himself in the head with his hand, while the dog, ferociously, banged his head on the pointed gravel.

When a car approaches and Malik gestures for the moribund dog to the driver, the latter reacts by spitting into the air and exclaiming "Stray dogs! Dogs¹⁰!". Clearly, Malik and the dog are one for that driver, and their suffering is something to be dismissed, perhaps even despised, as they are invisible beings on the margins of society. A slow death will consume the dog, much like the pain that will consume Malik's body and soul.

In the following paragraphs, a critical literary analysis¹¹ of *The Newspaper Seller* will be presented, in order to highlight the value of this short story in its original, local context.

The Newspaper Seller, a Work Out of the Choir:

During the 1950s in Qatar, three main elements were key to the development of local modern literature: the oil industry, journalism and education (Saleem 2017, 383). The economic and cultural development quickly drove the immigration process from all over the world, particularly from Asian countries. Despite this, however, literary works¹² about the life of immigrants (called also 'expats') are very scant, although these citizens constitute a large part of the communities in the Gulf. Michalak-Pikulska affirms (2016, 20) that it is

⁹ Nurah al-Saad, *Bā'i' al-ḡarā'id* (The Newspaper Seller), 1989, p.7.

¹⁰ It is well-known that *kalb* 'dog' is a grave insult in Arabic and Islamic culture.

¹¹ It should be highlighted that Qatari literature is still a dimension that, despite progress being made, deserves sustained in-depth investigation, as the body of studies available – mainly in Arabic - is currently scarce, if compared to other Gulf literature. For an introduction of the Qatari short stories see in Arabic the work of Muhammad Kafud (Muḥammad Kāfūd) entitled *Al-Qiṣṣah al-qaṣīrah fī Qaṭar* dated 1985.

¹² In her study *Modern Literature of the Gulf*, Michalak-Pikulska (2016, 20–21) highlights that in the Gulf the short story dedicated to the immigrants in their role as servants have been mainly written by Kuwaiti authors such as Walid al-Rujayyib (Walīd al-Ruḡayyīb), Fahd al-Duwayri (Fahd al-Duwayrī) and Laila al-Uthman (Laylah al-Uṭmān).

possible to find short stories dedicated to servants in Gulf literature, where “heroes are ordinary Indian or Asian servants. This subject was the outcome of the huge influx of labour force of poor Asian countries with the aim of making money”.

Thus, *The Newspaper Seller* represents perhaps the most important and pioneering example of the Qatari short story genre about immigration. According to al-Nadawi (2007, 58, 62–63) in this short story, Nurah al-Saad’s aim is to illustrate the reader some of the problematic manifestations of the local social imbalance and rift, as well as the fragmentation of social ties, that often afflicts societies during their civilisational transitions. Nurah al-Saad’s work aims to expose and condemn a social reality, marked by differences between classes based on wealth and luxury, which has led to the decay of core cultural values, in favor of a more materialistic spirit. To represent this, the writer extracts a model from the social fabric, as she depicts the life of misery and suffering of the Asian worker Malik, of a member and symbol of the growing expatriate labour force at the time.

It is a sensitive subject within the Gulf countries, but the writer cannot overlook this aspect of her local reality. Through her narration, she chooses to tackle the potential dangers taking root in the demographic structure, and uses her artistic creativity to reveal with great humanity the suffering of expatriate people. In doing so, she makes us see reality through the eyes of an Asian labourer, who came over with his dream of money and wealth, and whose life turned into a daily struggle, as he finds himself struggling against marginalisation and alienation.

Economic and social changes, as well as the conflict between past and present generations, have caused social fragmentation, at this time allowing the materialistic spirit to emerge and sparking concern for Qatari writers: they are witnessing the dissolution of those social ties that used to be based on love and cooperation. Compared to her literary peers Nurah al-Saad, in *The Newspaper Seller*, conveys a more disillusioned character typology, and objectivity replaces subjectivity, where symbolism is used to support her critical description of reality.

Echoing al-Nadawi’s statement mentioned above, Abu Shihab (2016: 28, 96) also affirms that the issue of labour and employment in Qatar, described in *The Newspaper Seller*, trends towards an unprecedented topic in the short story genre of the time. It marks a shift from the subjective values of romantic tropes that dominated the Qatari short story, to encompass a wider dimension, characterised by humanity and psychological exploration, which brings the Qatari story closer to its maturity, in terms of style and art.

In her study, al-Hirtani (2013, 267–268) highlights on the linguistic style employed by Nurah al-Saad, as her sarcasm and dry sting support her use of symbolism and come together as a powerful tool to create an atmosphere that combines the essence of heritage and development, the diversity of narrative models, and the figurative approach to common topics. Al-Hirtani (2013, 268)

adds that, as shown in *The Newspaper Seller*, this writer is capable of expressing her concern in a manner that is equal parts informing and witnessing, and she employs the spirit of ‘carnivalisation’ to target the living conditions of the lower class, mainly composed by Asian immigrants, and to bring reproach upon this aspect of reality.

It can be observed that the author, through the interior voice of Malik, blames the profound hierarchical, social and economic differences that characterised Qatar at that time, as when she writes:

كل مرة سيذوب الثلج، وهم سيدفعون في مقابل ذلك، كل مرة. كل مرة. ما الفائدة، هذه الشمس فقط من نصيبه، أما الثلج فيملكه الآخرون¹³.

The ice always melts and they always have to pay... always... What benefit is that? For him, the sun, while the ice is for the others.

The reference to a sort of “invective” (*hiġāʿ*) by the author, allows us to find some residual elements of pre-Islamic poetry in this story. In fact, in Qatar, as well as in the rest of the Arabian Peninsula, poetry has always been the most historically widespread genre, as a heritage of the Bedouin culture. The image of Malik losing his gaze and himself in his deserted surroundings, makes us think of the bleak representation of the remains of the abandoned camp (*aṭlāl*). Similarly, by using the image of an animal (a dog), the author evokes an association to the meticulous descriptions of animals, a recurring element found in the *qaṣīda*; by focusing on the details of animal imagery, poets can easily give life to states of mind, to the emotions of the human soul, and to spiritual and physical pains (Amaldi 2004, 22–23). The description that Nurah al-Saad presents of the many journeys on foot that Malik is forced to take every day, in order to reach his two places of work, as well as his accommodation, recalls a parallel with the overarching life journey (*raḥīl*) of a man, who must incessantly work hard and can never stop going.

Conclusions:

Qatari literature is a little-explored domain in Western studies, although it offers an abundance of fascinating literary prose works, such as short stories and novels, which deserve to be investigated. This study aims at contributing to enrich the discourse on Qatari literature, by offering a literary analysis of the short story entitled *The Newspaper Seller* by Nurah al-Saad, which is included in the homonym collection which was published in 1989.

This piece depicts the harsh daily routine of an Asian worker, Malik, in the erstwhile city of Doha and offers the reader a precious insight about the reality of the expats’ lives in the 1980s, who left their motherland, dreaming of an opportunity to make some fortune. The short story was highly praised by literary critics, since it is considered a pioneering work, due to its refined narrative techniques and novel topic in the Qatari short story genre of that time.

¹³ Nurah al-Saad, *Bāʿi al-ġarāʿid* (The Newspaper Seller), 1989, p.7.

Concerning the narrative techniques, the author uses interior monologue, associations, stream of consciousness, imagery and symbols, which were considered innovative in the local literary context. In fact, stories and characters were mainly presented photographically and descriptively according to the literary trend, which characterised the 1970s and the first half of 1980s.

Moreover, *The Newspaper Seller* is very interesting because it presents an original topic, which is the harsh living conditions of Asian workers, who live in a foreign environment and culture. Nurah al-Saad very humanely illustrates a delicate social issue, which emerged at the beginning of the economic and social transformations of the Gulf area and, through her story, she has finally given voice to the unheard voices.

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any of the authors.

Conflicts of interest.

The authors of this paper certify that they have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial or non-financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; membership, employment; affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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