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The Impact of the *Arabian Nights*
on Modern Arabic Poetry

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*For my wife Samah and my children: Basil, Majd and Ward
for their love, patience and support*

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Preface

Interest in folk literature took a novel turn beginning in the mid-twentieth century, after a long period of devaluing this type of writing. Folk literature had been viewed as neither canonical nor authorized, but as the product of a naive and spontaneous culture; it failed to obey literary rules and standards established by the dominant official circles.

This change in attitude toward folk literature concurred with the political, social, and literary transformations taking place in the Arab world in the wake of World War II, transformations greatly affecting Arab consciousness regarding both real-life and artistic issues. The 1950s was a time of social and political liberation in the Arab world, a time when the Arab nations freed themselves from the monarchic and feudal regimes nurtured by imperialism, particularly those represented by Western mandates. A number of Arab states, headed by Egypt, became republics.

These political developments occurred at a time when the literary school of socialist-realism reached maturity. By the 1960s, this socio-political trend achieved its greatest popularity whereby it influenced most Arab intellectuals. They strove to free their literary works from the far-from-realistic school of romanticism, committing themselves to the problems of the masses, thereby transforming literature from "monarchic," as they called it, to "popular." This literary *commitment* to address their nations' problems was not limited to discussion of politics and social issues, but also involved the adoption of new literary and poetic styles, liberated from classical rules and deemed more appropriate to the new situation. Writers forged alternatives to the old style that had evolved under the aristocracy and ancient regimes.

The Arab revolution, which began as a political rebellion against colonialism and the ruling regimes, developed into an all-encompassing revolution spanning all domains of life. Thus we saw activities for women's liberation alongside calls for liberating thought, literature, and other aspects of life in the Arab world. This comprehensive revolution bequeathed new literary forms and writing styles, especially in poetry, most significantly the emergence of *shi'r al-tafīla* (free verse poetry), the greatest change to occur in Arabic poetry in the modern age. The traditional literary regime began to gradually shake and fundamental changes occurred in the conception, essence, and components of literature, concurring with the changes taking place in social and political concepts, perhaps most notably the rise in prominence of the previously marginalize problems of the masses.

For example, the use of folk symbols and other folk materials, as well as the transformation of colloquial expressions into *fushḥā* and the *imitation* of the colloquial style, came to play important roles in literature beginning in the mid-1950s, which constitutes a characteristic of *modernism* in general. This folk-oriented trend emerged quite slowly at first, because at the time, modernist Arab poets were

more given to utilizing foreign myths, reflecting the influence of Western poetry. But in time, this folk trend came to enjoy increasing acceptance, and the study of folklore flourished as never before; its results became widely known and recognized by dominant Arab cultural circles.

Folklore studies reached their greatest prominence at the beginning of the 1960s, drawing the attention of Arab writers and intellectuals, who showed a growing interest in every kind of folk literature. This development induced writers to recognize the value of such literature and its ability to further the evolution of poetry, on the one hand, and create a communicative bridge with the common people, on the other hand, thus making folk literature one of the most important sources of inspiration for Arab poets at that time.

Modern free verse poetry amplified and extended this tendency through the greater freedom and openness it offered Arabic poetry, which had previously been restricted to the classical verse patterns. The new poetry, with its varying line length and varying numbers of feet, gave greater flexibility and made poetry more open to outside literary influences, including prose. Gradually it became clear that the "new poetry" was not merely a formal or prosodic revolution but rather a comprehensive transformation encompassing meter, form, language, and modes of artistic expression. It is thus no surprise that the same period saw a substantial increase in the use of myths and narrative in poetry, as well as the interjection of colloquial expressions and folk symbols. These innovations began in the mid-1950s and became truly notable in the 1960s and 1970s.

These changes revealed bias in the traditional class-oriented view on what comprises the literary canon, eschewing folk literature despite its valid literary and artistic criteria. They also revealed that scholarly studies of literature had been lacking objectivity and ignoring numerous facets of literary evolution, and thus failing to present an integrated picture of literary evolution.

Unfortunately, this interaction between canonical and folk texts, despite its significance and importance in the evolution of modern Arabic poetry, still has yet to receive the scholarly attention it deserves; it has only been mentioned in passing by critics and scholars, who have thus far failed to provide an analysis of its causes, effects, and dimensions. The time has come to undertake such a study, especially given the emergence of the theory of *intertextuality* as one of the most important contemporary theories on textual reading and analysis. Such a study should interest intellectuals, poets, and critics alike, arousing awareness of "trans-system" textual relationships, including their value in creating an appropriate balance for pleasing artistic tastes as well as attracting readers, in an age where consumers of poetry are waning.

Folk literature can serve as a mirror offering an honest and spontaneous reflection of popular tastes. Its symbols provide an objectivity that ensures both poetry's artistic value as well as communication with the reader. Folk literature is also an art form, albeit one that has evolved idiosyncratically in response to popular needs and the social and psychological development of the common people. Thus

the models and genres of folk literature have always been close to readers' imaginations and emotions. References to folktales in canonical literature thereby give texts popular overtones; the individual's thoughts melds with those of the collective, helping to clarify meanings and enhance communication, since folk symbols and *allusions* are stored in every reader's memory. Their use expands the bounds of creativity and opens new horizons for poets, enabling them to express their thoughts with greater artistic freedom.

Political, social, intellectual, and artistic factors had conspired to bring about a comprehensive integrated revolution affecting Arab social and political institutions as well as the literary canon, whereby folk literatures were drawn from the margins towards the center. This literary movement can be divided into three periods: from 1945 to 1961 (a time of expanding nationalism); from 1962 to 1987 (when nationalism became undermined and the Arabs withdrew into themselves); and from 1988 to the present (a time of social and political disintegration among the Arabs, a spread of theories of the *absurd*, and a return to a closed self).

The use of folk literature in modern Arabic poetry, and the influence of folk thought in general, reached a climax during the second period, after which it began to wane. It appears that the political, nationalist factor was a highly influential force in folk use, since as national feelings grew and the Arabs came to believe in national unity in the first period, we notice an obvious neglect of folk literature. Then, as the dream of unity faded (especially after 1961), the Arabs began to withdraw into themselves and came to show a greater interest in individual folk literatures. I thereby take 1961 (and not 1967, as do most other studies) as the watershed year between the first and the second periods. I will also take into consideration the year 1987, when the first Palestinian intifada broke out, which Arabs perceived as the final episode of Arab nationalism. The intifada has had considerable effect on thought and literature among the Arabs in general, and on the Palestinians in particular.

Between the years 1962 and 1987, use of folk literature was not a passing fad with limited effect that could be dismissed with a mere note. Rather, it encompassed artistic dimensions whose influences remain to this day. Noting the significance of this trend casts doubt on the validity of many widely accepted truths, including the standard dual division of literature into canonical and non-canonical. In fact, some poets melded their canonical literary texts with folk *allusions* so tightly that the boundaries between the two were effectively abolished, so that their texts could no longer be judged by class criteria, as had been done habitually. Furthermore, some texts came to possess an unprecedented hybrid linguistic register which combined canonical and folk expressions. Most striking is the emergence of a sublime qualitative hybridization, with poets composing verses using folktales as their model, essentially formulating folk narratives in poetic form; other poets inserted folktales or folksongs into their verses, creating texts from an amalgam of two or more distinct genres.

Given this background, in the present study, I attempt to demonstrate the value of engaging in serious analysis of the use of folk literature in canonical writings. I also show that the general disregard of this trend has obscured much significant information about the relationship between these two types of literature and the emergence of new hybridized literary genres. Such genres may open new horizons for literary variation, enabling poets to create new works that go beyond recognized traditional forms.

Folk literature is multi-faceted with a broad and varied influence on canonical poetry. It is naturally not possible to provide a profound, detailed analysis of all aspects of this phenomenon in a single study. Most modernist poets have been influenced by folk proverbs and benefitted from their rhetoric, brevity, formal structure, and contents. These poets developed various techniques for using folk elements and for manipulating their components. I have previously discussed aspects of this development in four studies published between 2006 and 2012.¹ These studies explore how poets have used traditional Arab anecdotes and folktales, and how they have shaped their texts, enriching them with various narrative techniques, which clearly enhanced their artistic and symbolic value. I have published three additional studies,² in which investigate the extent and types of this folk influence as well as the variation in style, technique, and genre resulting from the encounter between these two distinct literary forms.

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1 See: Khoury 2006b; Khoury 2007b; Khoury 2010; Khoury 2012.

2 See: Khoury 2006a; Khoury 2007a; Khoury 2008.