

# THE ARAB CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE IN THE HASHEMITE KINGDOM OF JORDAN

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## BRIEF HISTORICAL NOTE

THE modern history of Jordan began with the arrival of Emir Abdullah Ibn Al-Hussein in the country, in 1921. Till then Jordan was a vast territory, mostly arid deserts, and thinly populated. Yet Emir Abdullah succeeded, in a short time, in establishing there a constitutional and democratic institution, and in eliminating the Beduin raids. He built an army that was considered to be one of the strongest armies of the area, for its discipline and high military qualities.

In 1946 a treaty was concluded between Jordan and Great Britain by which Jordan became a Kingdom, and King Abdullah mounted the throne. Until 1948 the population of Jordan – then called Transjordan – was only about four hundred thousand. The Palestine calamity arose in that year because of the foreign invasion that established there the state of Israel, leaving without support one million Arab refugees. These were expropriated of their houses, their orange groves and their fertile soil.

The Jordanian army – that counted then about 4,000 soldiers only – participated in the Palestine war in 1948 and succeeded in maintaining a big part of the territory. This part was united with Transjordan in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. This unity was proclaimed on April 24th, 1950. Thus Palestinians and Transjordanians were fraternized in one loyalty, without any sort of difference in rights and obligations. With this unity the population of Jordan has increased to about two millions, now, a great part of which are refugees.

In 1951 King Abdullah died in Jerusalem, and in 1953 King Hussein Ibn Talal mounted the throne. Assuming the power at eighteen years of age, he has shown that he is an intrepid pilot of a small ship perturbed by various waves, holding the rudder with great skill, and always guiding the ship safely and surely to a secure harbour.

## THE LITERARY MOVEMENT

Now, speaking about contemporary literature in Jordan we, naturally, refer to that of both Banks, Western and Eastern, of which Jordan is composed nowadays.

The modern literary movement began in the Eastern Bank together with the arrival of Emir Abdullah, in 1921. He was accompanied, among others, by a group of well known writers and poets from various Arab countries, especially from Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. The Emir himself was a distinguished poet and prose-writer; and his court poetry and literary discussions were vivacious. Then, as teaching and printing progressed rapidly and widely, literature spread rapidly as well, and new names appeared in the reviving movement.

On the Western Bank – Palestine – the literary movement started a few years before. The foreign missions, and particularly the Russian teachers' training school at Nazareth, and the English secondary school at Jerusalem, and also the close relations with the great Arab centres of culture: Egypt, Syria and Lebanon, had a direct influence on the intellectual orientation of the country. The literary movement began to give its first fruits a little before the first world war (1914-18). In that period the leaders and pioneers of the cultural movement, in general, and the literary movement in particular, were mostly young men, graduates of 'Al-Azhar' of Egypt, and other graduates of schools of the foreign Christian missions in Palestine.

Thus the religious influence, together with the influence of European culture, and the rising of the spirit of nationalism, all simultaneously accompanied the first steps of the Jordanian literature of the twentieth century.

The intellectual maturity, not only of Jordan but of the whole Arab territory of the Middle-East, found a great stimulus in the Ottoman constitution of 1908. After long centuries of depression and terrorism, the constitution came to open the doors of the Arab countries to a new light, and to free patriotic and liberal aspirations. These were, till then, proceeding secretly among the young Arab men of the Turkish army, and of the Arab countries that were ruled by the Ottomans.

Syria (that included then Lebanon, Palestine and Transjordan) was the centre of the Arab liberal movement nourished to maturity by poets, prose writers, public speakers and journalists. These were enthusiastic to attain independence for the Arab countries. Palestine and Transjordan participated, rather with blood than with letters, in the liberal movement. They offered victims to the prisons and gallows of the Turkish commander, Jamal Pasha (called 'the blood-shedder'). Because of his tyranny the great Arab revolution exploded in 1916. The revolution was led by King Hussein Ibn Ali, of Hijaz, and his sons, Feisal, Abdullah, Ali and Zeid. It began in Hijaz and soon it spread in every part of Syria and Iraq. Supported by the British and French allies, the revolution ended the Turkish domination that had lasted for four centuries. Soon after that the

Arabs started a longer and harder struggle against the allies themselves.

In fact, the British and French divided the Arab countries between them: the French took Syria and Lebanon, and the British took Transjordan, Palestine and Iraq. This foreign domination took place from 1918 to 1946 in Syria and Lebanon; and to 1948 in Palestine, while Jordan and England concluded, as we mentioned before, a treaty between them in 1946. The Treaty was ended, once and for all, in 1956 by King Hussein.

In such a sanguine and tragic atmosphere Jordanian literature was born and grew up; it is almost a literature of resistance and of continuous struggle for freedom and independence, in both sides of the country.

It is true that our lyric poets, like all the other poets of the world, have written poems of love and of the beauty of women and nature; yet all of them have contributed to the struggle: the eldest among them fought against the Ottomans; the less old against the British, and the younger generations have contributed and are still contributing to the resistance against the invaders who erected their state along the Palestinian sea-shore, under the name of 'Israel'. There can be no other motive more important than this to which the actual literature in Jordan can tend. It is a question of life or death, and of a lost national dignity that must be regained at any price.

To the struggle, poets and prose-writers have participated, not only with nice words, but some of them have carried machine-guns and gave their life generously. Among others we mention the poet Abdul-Rahim Mahmoud, who died on the battle-field near Nazareth in 1948, at the age of thirty-five. He had fought since 1936; and in that time, while he was on the hills with the gun in his hand, he wrote a poem entitled 'The Martyr', the verses of which are still read in the schools of Jordan. Here is a part of it:

On my hand I hold my soul  
 ready to throw it down into the abyss of death –  
 A man should live with honour and dignity  
 if not, he should gloriously die.  
 A noble soul has two aims:  
 Either to die, or to reach glory.

What is life? I would not live  
 unless I am feared and my homeland is safe,  
 so that, when I speak, the world listens to me  
 and my speech loudly echoes among all peoples.

I clearly see my death  
 Yet I go fast towards it,  
 To sacrifice myself for the defence of my rights

and of my home, is all that I desire.

For that, I feel happy  
to hear the clash of swords,  
and delighted  
to see the blood-shed  
and to watch the corpses  
spread over the hills  
torn to pieces between  
the sharp teeth of the ferocious beasts.  
Honestly, this is the most glorious death  
and the most desirable end of a man.

\* \* \* \* \*

Such was the furious spirit when the British were still ruling in Palestine, and such was the poetic expression of the national fury. The hard political struggle has reflected its cruel shadow on the whole life of the Jordanians, including their literature. This continued to tend to realism: distress and wretchedness have always found their expression in Jordanian poetry and narrative. The same Abdul-Rahim Mahmoud, in a poem entitled 'Elegy for a Porter', commiserates a poor porter who was found, dead in the street, in Haifa, with a rope and basket beside him.

Here is how he expresses his sorrow:

You lived as a stranger among the people  
and as a stranger you have died.  
By nature, men are always cruel  
and among them a wretched man  
can never find a place.  
Had you tortured them with your rope  
they would have wept for you  
and torn to pieces their clothes for sorrow.  
Or had you fed them from your basket  
a thousand speakers  
would have now praised you,  
and considered your basket  
sublime and immaculate.  
But you are only a porter  
of no interest for them,  
and of you they fear no harm.  
Your loaf of bread was always wet  
with pure sweat and tears.  
You have never done violence to anyone

but violence has always been done to you,  
 and always you were  
 deprived of everything,  
 And now, as you are dead,  
 no one weeps  
 and no heart feels sorry for you.

\* \* \* \* \*

Although there are different styles and tendencies, realism is the basis on which the Jordanian literature stands. Because of the circumstances, it is an engaged literature, that aims to realize justice and human rights.

The refugees, who are the wanderers under every sky, look for justice, and a return to their homeland as the most essential aims. Their great calamity lives in their hearts and before their eyes. All Jordanian poets and prose-writers have written much about it. Here is a part of a poem of Abu Salma, from his book of verses *The Vagabond*:

Brother! You are my companion on every road;  
 Come; carry your wounds  
 and let us proceed together.  
 We have made sanguine passes  
 that grew in the soil, the most tender grass.  
 If we do not get burnt,  
 how could the light  
 illuminate the universe  
 and guide the others safely?  
 The free blood that brought us together  
 is the same blood that immortalized  
 the most splendid pages of history.

\* \* \* \* \*

Let us proceed: you hand in mine,  
 on the way of life,  
 and tell me now,  
 who else would defend our homeland  
 and answer its appeal  
 if we will not do that ourselves?  
 Look at the orphans  
 with their eyes inflated with tears;  
 look at the virgins falling down like comets,  
 and the old men tired of the years  
 but more tired and pained

with distress and calamity.  
 They are the victims of injustice;  
 did you know them?  
 They are my parents and friends  
 till Eternity.

\* \* \* \* \*

Oh my beloved Palestine!  
 How can we meet again?  
 will my eyes one day be able  
 to see again the most sacred land,  
 and see my heart there,  
 on the sea-shore,  
 spreading once more its virgin dreams  
 while, there, the brown girl  
 amuses herself  
 and gives light  
 to her lovers' eyes?!

\* \* \* \* \*

Oh, you who weep!  
 What use can tears have now  
 since you have become  
 a wanderer with every blowing wind?  
 Brother! We havn't lost  
 The immortal homeland,  
 but it remains for ever  
 deep and unforgettable in our hearts.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jordanian literature in general, and not only the poetry, has the same tendencies, the same furious spirit and the same fervent style.

Mrs. Asma Toubi, in her book of essays entitled *Talks from the heart*, writes under the title of 'A feast of refugees':

'Today is a feast... In a poor room nearby, there is a family of six persons, representing three generations, an old couple, a young couple and two children, a girl eight years of age, and a boy four years old.'

'The youngest goes out to play, but he soon comes back crying. He wants a ring-shaped cake and a coloured egg, like all the other children who go along the streets munching a cake and eggs. The eight year old girl is silent; but some minutes before she was looking pain-

fully at her torn shoes. She says nothing, because it seems that, although she is young, she understands that her parents have no money, and that it is useless to ask them for a new pair of shoes... But the cake... and the eggs?!

'The young mother turns away her face to hide the tears in her eyes. She thinks of all what she has read in books and magazines about the misfortune of mankind... Suddenly an idea comes to her mind as a heavenly support... Oh! What if she sold her own hair?! Would it be easy to find a buyer, in this big and clamorous city, who may wish to buy such kind of pearls?!

Asma Toubi goes on completing the picture of the poor family on that feast day; and then concludes:

'Was that really a feast?!  
'Well! It was probably the feast of  
distress... or perhaps a new kind of feast was inverted...  
It was the feast of wretchedness, or of lost hope!'

. . . . .

Also Jordanian narrators have always found themselves compelled to go back to the same source, however hard they tried to look for other subjects for their novels and short stories. It is absolutely impossible for them not to live the tragic reality of their people deeply.

The narrative works of Najati Sidki, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Samira Azzam, Najwa Ka'war, Mahmoud Irani and all the others, represent Jordanian society, with all its characteristics and peculiarities; with the tom tents of the refugees under the sun and hail, the borders, the invaded fertile soil lying there in sight, the precious orange groves left to the invaders. We also find in it the life of the city and that of the village, innocent loves and false loves, simplicity and ingenuousness besides cunning and wickedness, humour besides sorrow and pain.

To this Jordanian narrative is fairly applicable what the Italian writer Luigi Capuana wrote to define the naturalism of Giovanni Verga: 'Verga, when the idea comes to his mind to put his villagers into an artistic form, is never limited to gathering some generalities, but he circumscribes his land. For him it is not sufficient that those characters of his are Italians - an Italian villager is an abstraction - he goes much beyond that. He wants them to be Sicilians... He needs them to be exactly from a determined province, a determined city, of a very small piece of land as large as the palm of his hand. Only then he stops'.

Here, with a very light touch, we can easily modify the definition of Capuana by using the words 'Arab - Arabs' in lieu of 'Italian - Italians',

'Jordan' instead of 'Sicily' and 'Jordanian author' instead of 'Verga', so that the definition becomes right and precise.

Not being able to discuss all the works of the Jordanian narrators, in this brief paper I shall confine myself to giving an example from my own works; that is my novel entitled 'The House Beyond the Borders', published in Beirut in 1959. It is a novel that represents the Palestinian calamity. It shows a small happy Palestinian family at Jaffa. The family consists of four persons, the father, the mother and two children. They have their own little house and beautiful garden, and they are lucky to have good neighbours, a family of three persons', the father, the mother and the young daughter 'Faiza', who is very dear to the two children. They play together at home or on the beach, and they go to school together in her father's car every day.

Years pass easily and happily; then suddenly the war explodes, and life becomes more horrible every day. The young Faiza is injured and sent to the hospital; the father of the two children is bombed at the doorstep of his house, and the children and their mother are forced to leave Jaffa by sea to Beirut, carrying nothing with them.

The two children grew up together in the hope of going back home one day. One of them goes back secretly to Jaffa, and there he is killed by the Jews who live in his old house. His mother and brother, in Beirut, are informed of his death. This gives them one more reason to live with the memories of their old house, and of the two beloved persons who have been killed there. They are always haunted by the memories of their small house on top of the hill, in Jaffa, where the father was killed at the doorstep, and the son was assassinated at the gate. They also remember the young Faiza and her good-hearted parents who are left behind. Days cannot lessen their love of their old house, nor weaken their hope of going back to it one day.

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I also wish to give another example from the works of Mahmoud Irani, author of the following volumes, *The beginning of a course* (1936), *Among the people* (1955), *What a little price!* (1936) and *When will the night be over?* (1964). The first one of these four books contains short stories and some essays, the other three are collections of short stories. They represent Jordanian life and society after 1948. In some of them, and especially in the following two stories: 'The good earth' and 'Out from Paradise', Irani describes the good Palestinian soil, the orange orchards that perfumed the sea-shore, the splendid sun on the shining gold of the oranges, the perfumes of the lemon trees in bloom, the good people who, with their precious sweat, grew all good things in the fertile soil. That



good earth was once a Paradise; but the day came when the brave good cultivators were forced to leave it in a very tragic way.

In the rest of his short stories, Irani is of realistic tendencies, like all the other Jordanian short-story-writers. The characters and events of his works are inspired by Jordanian life.

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The Jordanian writers are well informed of the various literary movements of the West. Most of them know English or French, or both; some others know Italian, German, Spanish or Russian as well. Through these foreign languages they read the foreign literatures, and translate various literary works into their Arabic language. The most renowned translator of European culture into Arabic was Adel Zwaiter – who died in Nablus-Jordan, in 1957. He translated from French 38 volumes of the greatest works of famous European authors; among others we might mention the names of: Rousseau, Renan, Voltaire, Ludwig, Demmingham, Le Bon, Anatole France and many others.

Ancient and modern literatures of East and West, as well as all schools of art of many periods, are well known to Jordanian writers, and they are much discussed by the press and in books. Some Jordanian authors write directly in a European language; like Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, author of an English novel, entitled 'Hunters in a narrow street' published in England; and Soraya Malhas, author of a book of English verses entitled (Prisoners of the time) published in Beirut-Lebanon.

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Among the various schools of art, even hermetism and symbolism have some partisans among the Jordanian poets. The verses of Salma Khadra Jiayyousi and Fadwa Tookan are also hermetic. Yet, surely, the following poem of Salma Jiayyousi, entitled 'Dedication', is not hermetic (This poem is published in her book of verses, entitled *Return from the dreaming fountain*):

A friend presented to me a pen.  
 I joyfully exclaimed:  
 'The first thing I shall write with it  
 will be a sweet letter to mamma,  
 expressing to her  
 my deepest love and eagerness'.  
 I forgot for an instant,  
 for a wink,  
 that you, mother,  
 are beneath the earth  
 and can never read it!

Nor hermetic or abstract is the following poem by Fadwa Tookan, entitled 'Existence', from her book of verses entitled *Alone with the days*:

On earth I was a vagabond question  
 the answer of which was lost  
 in the dense darkness.  
 But you were my new light  
 that destiny has made to come up  
 from the heart of the darkness;  
 and as the stars  
 went round twice  
 I was illuminated by  
 your incomparable rays.  
 Soon darkness disappeared  
 and, trembling with joy,  
 I found in my hand  
 my lost reply.

.....

Oh, you! you, the near but extremely far!  
 Don't think any more of the twilight:  
 Warm is your spirit!  
 The world is yours and mine:  
 for us... the two poets  
 who, in spite of the great distance,  
 are united in one existence only!

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In her three books of verses, Fadwa Tookan sang poems of her love and sorrow. In the first book *Alone with the days* she also wrote poems on the pains of others, the distresses of her homeland, the sublimity of the human soul, and contemplations of loneliness; while in the last two volumes *I found her* and *Give us Love* Fadwa was but a lost and desolated heart of a woman.

On the other hand, Salma Jayyousi, in her only book of verses *Return from the Dreaming Fountain*, published in Beirut in 1960, writes verses of love, patriotism, and of the calamity of her people.

Other well known poets are Husni Zeid al Keilani, author of *Visions and Songs*, published in Amman in 1946; and Mahmoud el Hout, author of *The Arab Mythology, Arab Epics and Unfaithful Flames*. From the latter we quote the following poem entitled 'Autumn of a heart':

You have always smiled to me,  
 why are you now so sad?

Why do you complain?  
 you applauded me in previous times  
 and both of us flew over joyful days  
 and filled the world with happy love.

How did you get so soon to autumn  
 while you are still in the smiling spring?  
 How did the sweet palpitations  
 and vigorous youth so soon disappear,

O my heart?

This cloud, I cannot guess  
 how long it may remain.  
 Do you think it will soon move,  
 Or we shall die in the flowers' age  
 and never reach to realize  
 our sweet desires?

Don't think of fear  
 and trembling hope,  
 but let us sprinkle the garden of love  
 with subsequent rain-like kisses,

O my heart!

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Husni Zeid praised the farmer and glorified his labour in one of his most beautiful poems entitled 'The farmer':

The nightingale, in her nest, awakes you  
 O nobleman, the noblest of all men.  
 You go on digging the soil carefully  
 like a monk reading his book of prayers.

On the world's treasures  
 you walk on exhausted,  
 yet the others look at you with envy.

If people do not smile to you  
 the green herbs will happily;  
 Look how they lay around your feet  
 so nice, smiling and so sweet.

From your poor and humble hut  
 you raise high the great palaces of the others  
 satisfied, nevertheless, with your poor profit.

You farmer,  
 are our most precious treasure,

for all our wealth and joy  
are the sweet and lovely fruits  
of your endless sacrifices.

The most renowned dead Jordanian poets were: Ibrahim Tookan and Mustafa Wahbi Tell. The first died in Jerusalem in 1943, and the other in Amman in 1949. Tookan was considered 'the great poet of Palestine', while Tell was considered 'the great poet of Transjordan'. As a matter of fact, Tookan was the poet who, more vigorously than anyone else, expressed the patriotic feelings, and the enthusiasm for struggle of the Palestinians during the period of their resistance against the British occupation. He was the real and the most significant voice of that period in Palestine. His verses were like fuel for the resistance. He glorified the struggle and the martyrdom for freedom and independence. Here are few lines from one of his poems:

My heart is dedicated to my country  
not to a party, nor to a leader.  
My tongue is also like my heart,  
both are tied together intimately.  
Whether I am happy or unhappy,  
my aim is but to serve my nation.

On the other hand, Tell was the real and the most significant voice of the people of Transjordan; that is to say that, in his sarcastic poetry, the Transjordanians found their own lament and poverty, their own environment and popular dialect. Mustafa Wahbi has adopted popular and everyday spoken terms in his verses. These are full of humour and melancholy. A big part of his verses were inspired by wine and gipsies, and also by the intimate friendships with poor and inactive people. 'Vagabonds – he said in one of his poems – are my fellows; and you would never have blamed me if you had known how much good they have done to me!'

The verses of Tell have an incomparable style, not only in Arab literature, but also in other literatures of other nations, and of all times. They are distinguished by their spirit of absolute liberty: linguistic, artistic, political, social, patriotic and religious liberty. Notwithstanding the high administrative functions Tell occupied in the government, his most favourite and most intimate friends were the gipsies and the humble fellows of Transjordanian society. He liked to drink a toast with them and to attend the dances of the gipsy women.

Here is how Tell thinks of gipsy life:

In the poor tents of the gipsies  
my life would never be vainly lost

and God's forgiveness would never be  
 annoyed with my ever-changing manners.  
 The gipsy chief would not refuse  
 to toast with me in cognac at 'Ka'war's' bar.  
 In the gipsy tents there are no  
 cowardly men or women,  
 nor are there slaves who try  
 to disguise themselves to be free.  
 There are no criminals  
 with hands stained by innocent blood;  
 nor are there revengers or avengers.  
 There, there are no judges  
 whose judgements are ruthless,  
 and more burning than furnaces.  
 All are equal gipsies  
 and there is no difference, whatsoever,  
 between one and another.

.....

Tell deeply loved Transjordan, and deeply hated everything that was revealed to him as 'strange', and that did not belong to the good poor people to whom he belonged.

Here is how he expresses, in his typical style, his own thoughts of a hypothetical Paradise that is not Transjordanian. In these verses, we find some sort of a map showing the various cities, villages, pastures and water springs of the country:

Sheik Abboud says that  
 at the gate of Paradise  
 there is a door-keeper named (Rudwan).  
 This never tasted a drop of water  
 from (Rahub)  
 nor had he  
 any acquaintances at (Gilaad)  
 or any relative at (Sheehan).  
 He never sat  
 in the shadows of (Ajloun)  
 nor had he been a shepherd of lambs  
 on the hills of (Salt);  
 He never listened in the beautiful mornings  
 to our lovely birds  
 that fill the (Ghor) with joyful songs;

He never experienced love at (Wadi Ash-Shita)  
 nor had he procured Gazelles at (Huson);  
 and, worse than all,  
 He can never be a Jordanian!

\* \* \* \* \*

Oh, Sheik!  
 If that is really your Paradise  
 take it away!  
 It isn't the one we want;  
 and say openly with me;  
 'O, heavenly Paradise!  
 May you not be  
 our eternal dwelling'.

Now there is one thing more to add; that is the female contribution to Jordanian literature. As a matter of fact there should be no difference between male and female literature; this would be really an absurd idea. Yet, it would be interesting to underline that, among the small people of Jordan, there are five women who are among the most renowned poets and prose-writers of the entire Arab World.

Fadwa Tookan and Salma Jayyousi are two famous poetesses; both are much discussed in the press; Soraya Malhas is a poetess of abstraction. She also writes short stories, novels and essays. Asma Toubi is a prose writer highly esteemed, and much discussed by the Arab press. She wrote and translated from English three books entitled: *Talks from the heart*, *The lost son* and *The world consists of tales*. Samira Azzam is one of the outstanding Arab short-story-writers. She wrote four books of short stories: *Small things*, *The big shadow*, *Other short stories* and *The man and the Watch*. She also translated from English five novels of Bernard Shaw, Pearl Buck and others. Samira is the most significant writer of stories related to female affairs and feelings.